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**FIT FOR DEMOCRACY:
SPORT AND PRESIDENTIAL RHETORIC**

A Dissertation in

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by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines some of the ways in which presidential rhetoric about sport and athleticism has functioned historically to constitute both our ideals of citizenship and the presidency itself. Because sport and physicality have become rhetorically linked to modern notions of what it means to be “presidential,” modern presidents deploy rhetorics of sport and sports fandom to help define civic virtue and the ideal citizen. They also use rhetorics of sport to advance their own political identity and policy agendas.

Understanding the different ways in which presidents and presidential candidates have rhetorically engaged sport helps illuminate both the gendered nature of presidential character and our understanding of how ideas about “good citizenship” are constituted.

Through four case studies, I illustrate how presidents (or, in one case, a presidential candidate) have used rhetorics of sport and physicality to define or bolster their own image, promote core American values and particular conceptions of citizenship, and advance political or policy agendas.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Lauren Collins, editor for *The New Yorker*, observed that “American politicians, particularly those with a presidential cut of the jib, are perhaps most given to vigorous occupation, and exhibition, of their free time.”¹ Citizens are familiar with the imagery of Teddy Roosevelt and his hunting exploits, John F. Kennedy and his touch-football games on the White House lawn, Bill Clinton’s jogging, and George W. Bush working up a sweat on his Crawford Ranch. Almost every president participates in such ritualistic traditions as throwing out the first pitch at baseball games and attending the Army-Navy football game. The presidential image is so intertwined with sporting fandom and athleticism that it is now even used as a barometer for measuring the “likeability” of presidential candidates. During the 2008 election, the Associated Press changed its longtime poll question about which candidate voters would rather drink a beer with to a more sports-oriented question: Would you rather watch a football game with John McCain or Barack Obama?² The poll question is significant because it naturalizes the relationship between the presidency and sport.

Scholars have previously acknowledged the way that political campaigns and policy discussions are often articulated through sports metaphors, such as “the horserace,” “taking off the gloves,” or “fumbling” an answer.³ However, my project asks a different sort of question: how do sports references and images correlate with the public’s perceptions of what makes a candidate seem “presidential?”

Presidents themselves have shaped answers to that question by rhetorically linking sport with national character. Most recently, president Barack Obama gave an

exclusive half-hour interview to popular ESPN columnist Bill Simmons, “The Sports Guy,” in March, 2012. In his remarks, Obama underscored the importance of sports to democratic social values. After Simmons commented that it is a “weirdly important thing to have your president be able to come out and throw, like, a half-decent first pitch,” Obama responded:

Well, it’s funny, the mythology of sports is just — it’s deeply embedded in us. I remember I visited Iraq as a senator, and I think at that point I had already started running for president, but I can’t remember. Anyway, they invited me to go into this gym, and there were like 3,000 of our troops there. And somebody just handed me a ball and said, “Come on, Mr. President, take a shot.” And I said, OK, and I shot it and swished it from the 3-point line. And the amount of excitement that those folks had was surprising to me. But I think it just sort of reminded me of the kind of bond that sports creates in people. People — for all our differences politically, regionally, economically — most folks understand sports. Probably because it’s one of the few places where it’s a true meritocracy. There’s not a lot of BS. Ultimately, who’s winning, who’s losing, who’s performing, who’s not — it’s all laid out there.⁴

Chief executives have also invoked sport in their reflections on the ideals of citizenship. Symbolically, they have linked sport and athletics to values like strength, hard work, determination, perseverance, toughness, discipline, competitiveness, and teamwork. For instance, President Gerald Ford, in awarding the Presidential Medal of Freedom to U.S. Olympic track and field star Jesse Owens, praised Owens’s performance in the 1936 “Hitler Olympics” in Berlin for accomplishing “what no statesman, journalist,

or general achieved at that time—he forced Adolph Hitler to leave the stadium rather than acknowledge the superb victories of a black American.”⁵ Jimmy Carter began the tradition of inviting championship professional sports teams to the White House to be honored for their achievements. In 2009, Barack Obama, George W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George H.W. Bush and Jimmy Carter joined forces to honor thirty Americans for extraordinary community service at Major League Baseball’s All-Star Game.⁶ Presidents have not only reinforced the idea that sports are closely linked to American identity, but have used sports to bolster their own credentials as thoroughly American. An enthusiasm for sports has been particularly important for Barack Obama, who has had his citizenship questioned. ESPN columnist Bryan Curtis even remarked, “When Obama talks sports, he shows America his birth certificate.”⁷

Understanding the different ways in which presidents have rhetorically engaged sport can illuminate both our knowledge of presidential character and our understanding of American identity. Whether used to conjure core American values, to mobilize the citizenry for propaganda purposes, or to bolster a candidate’s image during an election campaign, I suggest that sport and physical vigor have become rhetorically linked to the modern conception of what it means to be “presidential.” This link may help to explain, at least in part, why the presidency is still dominated by a traditional conception of masculine leadership.

My dissertation probes discourses of sport and physicality in presidential rhetoric throughout the twentieth century and into the new century. Through several case studies, I illustrate how sport has been rhetorically linked to American ideals, how sport has been associated with civic virtue and good citizenship, and how presidents have deployed sport

to advance their policy agendas. Fundamentally, my project asks: How does presidential discourse about sport and athleticism constitute not just the presidential image but also the ideals of American citizenship? My research assumes that presidential rhetoric is significant to democracy for reasons other than the power and stature of the office. Presidents are elected because they represent, even embody, the spirit of the people themselves. Through their words and deeds, they constitute the American people, defining who does and does not count as a “real American.” They define the contours of the body politic and, in the process, draw the lines of inclusion and exclusion. They model how democratic deliberation *should* occur and the ways in which citizens should engage in public deliberations. By studying presidential rhetoric, we learn not only more about the powers of the office, but also about how good citizenship is defined and promoted. Before outlining the scope of my study, I will discuss the traditional wisdom on presidential rhetoric to show how my research engages larger issues in that subfield of rhetorical scholarship.

Presidential Rhetoric

The U.S. presidency is a highly visible office with a far-reaching influence. In 1960, Richard Neustadt argued that “presidential power is the power to persuade.”⁸ With this declaration, Neustadt located the institution of the presidency squarely within the domain of rhetoric. Samuel Kernell has written about the phenomenon of “going public,” a strategy whereby the president goes “over the heads” of Congress and promotes himself and his policies directly to the people. Modern-day chief executives, as these theorists

suggest, must therefore be concerned with public relations and popularity ratings.⁹

Political scientists, most notably Jeffrey Tulis, have lamented this modern concern with popular opinion, arguing that the reliance on popular appeals in the modern “rhetorical presidency” has fundamentally undermined the constitutional system of the founders, making words rather than deeds the measure of political success.¹⁰ Yet as Martin J. Medhurst has argued, rhetoric is, in itself, an important form of political action.

Presidents have always recognized that symbolic action and political action are essential to the president’s ability to govern.¹¹ Scholars of rhetoric, therefore, are concerned with how presidents “have attempted to use rhetoric to their advantage as political leaders.”¹²

Of particular significance to this study are the constitutive functions of presidential rhetoric. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson have argued that the president rhetorically constitutes the people by inviting us to live up to their vision of the ideal American. They observe that our chief executives “have the opportunity to persuade us to conceive of ourselves in ways compatible with their views of government and the world,” and that “presidents invite us to see them, the presidency, and the country’s role in specific ways.”¹³ The chief executive not only embodies that ideal, as the one leader chosen to represent the whole nation, but he also wields a unique and unmatched power to constitute and define the ideal citizen—in identity, behavior, and democratic action.

Leroy Dorsey has emphasized that our presidents lead primarily through moral appeals, seeking to influence the nation’s imagination and inspire the conscience of the citizenry. Because American democracy is premised on diversity and civic engagement, Dorsey has suggested that a president is responsible for weaving the dual tenets of

individualism and community into a unified, coherent vision for the people. The president thus both embodies and espouses the mythology of the American Dream—the idea that through hard work and adherence to democratic ideals any citizen can live a rich life in freedom, opportunity, and prosperity.¹⁴

Vanessa Beasley also has examined the way in which presidents have used language to develop and sustain shared ideas of national identity. She asks, who is the national “we” that presidents invoke in their rhetoric, and what defines “us?” Beasley has argued that the rhetorical presidency is an institutional response to diversity, because the president must somehow form a “we” out of a diverse mass of people by finding concrete ways of defining the otherwise abstract notion of American citizenship. Although the power to create and maintain shared national identity makes presidential rhetoric an important rhetorical phenomenon, Beasley has explained that the primary challenge of such constitutive discourse is to balance the two potential functions of nationalism: connectedness versus feelings of exclusion, intolerance, and inhumanity. To negotiate this rhetorical dilemma, presidents typically choose discourses imbued with traditional values of civil religion. At the surface, these discourses may appear inclusive and inviting, but ultimately they also result in exclusion and dismissal.¹⁵

Similarly, Mary Stuckey has explored how presidents throughout U.S. history have used language rooted in their own time, circumstance, and context to frame and influence definitions of citizenship. Stuckey observed that twentieth-century presidents have been most concerned with the parameters of citizenship, as one of the key roles of the office has become managing the increasing diversity of the American people. Through various case studies of twentieth-century presidential rhetoric, Stuckey found a

fairly uniform trend in the characteristics of ideal citizenship espoused by presidents, albeit they vary somewhat within different contexts. These qualities—self-discipline, independence, productivity, temperance—resonate with traditional conceptions of the Protestant work ethic and the core values of liberalism.¹⁶

Rhetorical scholars have assumed numerous and varied critical postures in their efforts to study the presidency, especially in response to political scientists—such as George Edwards—who have challenged the assumption that presidential rhetoric is a powerful force.¹⁷ Although Roderick Hart conceded that rhetoricians have at times been too careless with claims of causality, he also contended that most effects of presidential rhetoric are neither immediately obvious nor easily measured. Among these potential outcomes are the president’s ability to change the national conversation, influence the political agenda, change our definitional habits, crystallize vague concepts, alter the national imagination, model particular behaviors, and instantiate new myths for the people.¹⁸

Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson have emphasized the president’s role as a spokesperson for the institution itself. They see rhetoric as a source of institutional power, especially for the modern-day presidency, which is assisted by a vast network of media.¹⁹ In the modern presidency, presidents can speak when, where, and on whatever topic they choose, to a national audience through coverage by electronic media. To explore the link between rhetoric and institution, they examine rhetorical genres through which the president has performed duties essential to maintaining the institution. They argue that the constitutive power of each presidential rhetorical genre

ensures that “whatever the level of rhetorical sophistication of those who hold the office, they will be seen as, and acting as, the president.”²⁰

J. Michael Hogan has emphasized the agenda-setting powers of the rhetorical presidency, using the debate over the Panama Canal to illustrate how a president can define and frame debates over American foreign policy. Hogan’s study shows how a president can elevate a previously neglected issue into the national spotlight, even when that issue directly affects the lives of very few citizens. At the same time, according to Hogan, the debate over the Panama Canal demonstrated the limits of the rhetorical presidency. Although a president has considerable power to set the agenda of national debate, he cannot always control the direction that debate might take or the opposition’s responses to the issue.²¹

John Murphy has examined how character and nation merge in presidential discourse when the president situates himself as the embodiment of the kind of nation he describes. Murphy identified an archetype of presidential discourse, the “heroic tradition,” in which a particular president’s energy, intelligence, and power become legendary in the public imagination. He cites John F. Kennedy’s vigor and Theodore Roosevelt’s strenuous life as marking “the high points of this language in the presidency.”²² The heroic president “challenged citizens with his words and with highly publicized, rhetorically framed deeds.”²³ Through a rhetoric emphasizing the nation’s prosperity, power, restlessness, and boisterousness, heroic presidents amplify the nation while also emphasizing its unfinished state.²⁴ Murphy observes that presidents who have achieved this status as heroic leaders seem to share a cluster of characteristics: all were

military veterans, all positioned themselves as Washington “outsiders,” and all displayed an unusual eagerness to shape the nation.²⁵

Finally, a number of scholars have explored the gender dynamics embedded in presidential rhetoric and the rhetorical constraints those dynamics create for potential female presidential candidates. Karrin Vasby Anderson, for example, has argued that the presidency remains a “bastion of masculinity,” primarily because the rhetorical trappings of the office are firmly rooted in traditionally masculine traits and characteristics.²⁶ Similarly, Kathleen Hall Jamieson has explained that female politicians face a “double bind” when running for high political office, primarily because of inherent conflicts between gender expectations and the traditional demands of leadership. Women are socially constructed as nurturers and caretakers, Jamieson notes, whereas political leaders are expected to be rational and unemotional. Despite the recent success of some female political leaders, the double bind remains a significant obstacle for female candidates because it restricts their campaign strategies, damages their political credibility, and limits their political power. Demonstrating competence as a leader requires a woman to deny her femininity, while being too feminine may detract from her perceived competence as a leader.²⁷

Keeping in mind these various perspectives on presidential rhetoric, what does a study of how chief executives leverage sport rhetorically stand to contribute? I argue that, when skillfully deployed, the rhetoric of sport can be used to perform any and all of the functions of the modern rhetorical presidency. Furthermore, presidential discourse about sport and athleticism constitutes both the presidential image and the ideals of American citizenship. In four case studies, I show how presidents have leveraged sport

and physicality to establish their own “presidential” images, promote particular ideals of citizenship, and advance their domestic and foreign policy agendas. Although many presidents have reflected on their love of sport, I focus on four twentieth-century presidents who have made the rhetoric of sport and fitness central to their rhetorical leadership: Theodore Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, Gerald Ford, and Barack Obama.

Theodore Roosevelt utilized a rhetoric of “the strenuous life” to reconstitute the identity of the American people and reshape citizens’ beliefs about what it meant to “be American” in a period of social change and fragmentation. Similarly, John F. Kennedy’s rhetoric of vigor helped him frame his President’s Council on Physical Fitness as a necessary response to the Cold War, while Gerald Ford used a “rhetoric of athletic achievement” to set a precedent for all future presidents to uphold athletes as model citizens. Finally, Barack Obama made the sport of basketball central to his 2008 campaign in an effort to negotiate the racial tensions surrounding his candidacy. By examining the interplay between sport, rhetoric, and leadership in each of these cases, we can better understanding the nature of the modern presidential character and gain some insight into the rhetorical powers of the office.

Sport and the Presidency

Throughout the twentieth century, presidents have used the rhetoric of sport to give voice to their vision of the office and of the public’s role and responsibilities in the American democracy. Teddy Roosevelt’s participation in sport, including his hunting exploits, was widely publicized. During World War II, Franklin Delano Roosevelt

deemed that professional baseball should continue while many of the league's players were serving in the military, and of course FDR demonstrated his own physicality by serving as president despite his deteriorating health. The Kennedy family engaged in highly publicized football games on the White House lawn, and JFK officially incorporated athletics into his presidency through Executive Order 11074, which established the President's Council on Physical Fitness in 1963.²⁸ Presidents have long showcased their athletic abilities, cheered on their favorite teams, and mentioned local sports team during stump speeches. But how did sports, vigor, and physicality become such an important part of the modern presidential image?

In an age of mass media, presidents have used the rhetoric of sport to demonstrate that they have the physical fitness and vigor to serve in office—or sometimes to cover up their illnesses. Robert H. Ferrell has investigated such cover-ups ranging from Grover Cleveland's effort to hide a serious operation he underwent to remove a malignant tumor from the roof of his mouth to FDR's refusal to display the effects of polio and Dwight Eisenhower's silence about his heart condition. According to Farrell, all of these cover-ups violated the public trust by preventing voters from making informed decisions about whether these men were up to the strenuous requirements of the nation's most visible and important office.²⁹ Davis W. Houck and Amos Kiewe have also investigated the importance of "presidential bodies" as symbolic of a leader's "fitness" for office. In a case study of FDR and his physical limitations, Houck and Kiewe explore how Roosevelt was able to overcome the rhetorical bind of addressing his fitness for office without invoking his disability. They have argued that while Roosevelt attempted to conceal his polio as much as possible, he also used rhetorical appeals to reinforce the public

perception that he was healthy enough to lead. He employed a visual rhetoric emphasizing the appearance that he could walk and travel extensively by automobile, train, or airplane. After being elected to office, he also invoked metaphors of a healthy body to portray his own health and sickly body metaphors to describe his political opponents.³⁰

Although some presidents have used the rhetoric of sport and fitness simply to assure the public of their physical health, others have done so to shape a distinctive political personality or images. Tracing the historical relationship between sport and the U.S. presidency, historical scholar John Sayle Watterson has argued that the sports that presidents play are “political games, carefully designed to burnish and shape presidential images and to send a message that the commander in chief, like many of his fellow Americans, is a sports fan.”³¹ But as I will show in this study, the rhetoric of sports and fitness has, on occasion, become much more than simply an attempt to create identification between the president and sports fans. In some cases, appeals to sports and physicality become the foundation upon which presidents build not only their personal images but also their policy agendas.

Theodore Roosevelt, of course, is an obvious example, as his advocacy of “the strenuous life, the life of toil and effort, of labor and strife,” was essential to both his personal image and his aspirations for the nation as a whole.³² Biographer Kathleen Dalton has remarked that Roosevelt’s political personality was always characterized by a “crusader’s zeal,” and his conviction that public service required a “healthy combativeness” was evident in everything he did.³³ Roosevelt’s charismatic and heroic persona, defined in part by athletic vigor, inspired many future presidents, and it also set

the nation on the path to world leadership. TR's vision for American character—a vision of strong, aggressive, even masculine leadership—was clearly rooted in that celebration of physicality and the “strenuous life.” The physical nature of American character correlated with Roosevelt's conception of the role that the nation should play on the world stage.

John F. Kennedy, like Roosevelt, cultivated a youthful, vigorous image, perhaps in part to disguise his health problems, which included Addison's disease and chronic back problems.³⁴ Sixty years after Roosevelt preached the doctrine of the strenuous life, Kennedy resurrected Roosevelt's vision in a 1962 article for in *Sports Illustrated*, “The Vigor We Need.” In that article, Kennedy defined national character as the “physical hardihood that helped Americans in two great world wars to defeat strong and tenacious foes and make this country history's mightiest defender of freedom.”³⁵ Like Roosevelt, Kennedy campaigned for the presidency as a war hero, and his youthful energy was tailor-made for the television age. As president, he then incorporated sport into his political agenda, most notably rhetorically linking athletics to national character and by equating strong physical fitness with military preparedness, national security, and service to the country.

Not only did Kennedy imitate Roosevelt in these ways, but the young Democrat took Roosevelt's larger philosophical ideas about physicality and national character even further. Kennedy played a pivotal role in institutionalizing sport as a presidential concern by establishing a White House Committee on Health and Fitness, an annual National Youth Fitness Congress, and the President's Council on Physical Fitness. He issued directives for improving the physical condition of Armed Forces personnel, considered

government subsidies for Olympic competitors, and allocated money to support the participation of Armed Services personnel in the Olympics. He also increased State Department sponsorship of international athletic exchanges.³⁶

Gerald Ford, the only unelected president, was the next president whose political career was anchored in his athletic roots. As a star offensive lineman for the University of Michigan football team, Ford was the number-four vote getter in balloting for the 1935 Collegiate All-Star game. Two professional football franchises, the Detroit Lions and Green Bay Packers, even offered Ford contracts.³⁷ As president, Ford awarded Jesse Owens the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor. In the process, Ford cemented the relationship between American ideals and athletic achievement. In praising Owens for his hard work, dedication, discipline, and courage, Ford upheld Owens as a model citizen. Subsequently, every president has bestowed the medal upon at least one sports figure, and that list now includes Jackie Robinson, Joe Louis, Arthur Ashe, Hank Aaron, Muhammad Ali, Arnold Palmer, Joe DiMaggio, and Billie Jean King.³⁸

Following Ford's lead, it seems that presidents have found sport and athletic achievement useful as rhetorical devices to teach citizens how to live and to promote particular political agendas. In his dissertation on presidential sports encomia, Michael Hester has argued that ceremonial White House speeches honoring championship athletes have provided rhetorical moments that "allow presidents to cite the efforts of sports heroes as exemplary characteristics of a national identity."³⁹ Sociologist Richard Lipsky has explained that sports rhetoric is particularly effective because sports are socially accessible to all citizens. Therefore, sport is a flexible device that can be used by the left

or the right and targeted to any region or class.⁴⁰ Presidents often invoke sports metaphors in arguing for their policy agenda because they can make complex political issues easier to grasp. For example, Stephan Walk has demonstrated the elasticity of the “footrace” metaphor as a rhetorical device by contrasting how Lyndon Johnson and Ronald Reagan each used the metaphor. Johnson invoked the image of the starting line to underscore the responsibility of the government to assure that all citizens had an equal chance to “win the race,” while Reagan used it to emphasize each “runner’s” responsibility for their own success.⁴¹ In both cases, presidents used sporting language to argue in favor of their policy agendas.

Thus, presidents have leveraged the rhetoric of sport and physicality in a variety of situations and for a variety of purposes—to bolster their own images, to define national identity and constitute the ideal citizen, and to support their policy initiatives. Given all that, a more detailed accounting of how presidential sporting rhetoric functions is warranted. In this study, I suggest that while sport can operate as a powerful discursive device for bolstering a president’s image and promoting his political agenda, it also can generate ideological contradictions and reinforce a hierarchy of masculinity in the presidency. Cultivating a clearer understanding of how, and in what contexts, presidential rhetorics of sport and physicality function promises new insight into how the modern rhetorical presidency shapes our conceptions of leadership, citizenship, and national identity.

Research Questions and Methodology

My dissertation explores how presidential rhetoric about sport constitutes both the presidential image and an ideal citizenship. This study is guided by three overarching research questions: 1) How have presidents used sport or physicality to define or bolster their own image? 2) How have presidents rhetorically equated sporting participation and athletic achievement with core American values and conceptions of citizenship? 3) How have presidents leveraged sport to support their political goals? These three questions will be addressed through an examination of four case studies involving the presidents who leveraged sport and physicality in meaningful ways: Theodore Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, Gerald Ford, and Barack Obama. Although many presidents have reflected on their love of sport or have been involved in the sporting world, these four established and reinforced a standard for how both presidents and ordinary citizens should also embrace sport and athletic ideals.

In the course of answering my three primary research questions, I also address several secondary queries as well. First, although most modern presidents and presidential candidates have tried to rhetorically leverage sport for various political purposes, not all of them have been equally successful. I suggest that there are some factors that may determine whether a president can effectively leverage sport, particularly a president's perceived authenticity as a sporting fan or athlete and the kinds of sports in which he engages. Accordingly, sporting discourses have limits, as well as potential risks, in their deployment.

More importantly, the use of sport in presidential rhetoric carries significant ideological implications. Sport would seem to offer presidents and presidential candidates many benefits—most notably, athletics convey strength, aggressiveness, virility, vitality, vigor, and discipline—traits which strongly resonate with dominant notions of masculinity. If these are all desirable characteristics of a presidential image, then a female candidate would likely be unable to leverage sport to help her attain the traditionally masculine presidential image. As such, sport functions as another manifestation of the double bind, limiting the rhetorical strategies available to female political candidates.

I suggest that the association of sport with presidential rhetoric reinforces the masculine nature of the office itself. The ritual of talking about or playing sports functions as what Erving Goffman characterized as “gender display,” the expressive behaviors that exhibit conventionalized portrayals of culturally established correlates of sex.⁴² Some scholars have even claimed that sport is the last true bastion of masculinity. Michael Kimmel has contended that as women get stronger and they attain more social status, talking about sports has ballooned as a mechanism for the political exclusion of women.⁴³ Citing the ascension of football to the king of American sports as a way to preserve the fundamentally masculine nature of sport, Kimmel has referenced Mariah Burton Nelson’s book *The Stronger Women Get, the More Men Love Football*, in which she contended that women’s growing equality in sports has caused men to increasingly proclaim the superiority of football because it is the one sport exempt from Title IX and the one sport women do not play.⁴⁴

I also challenge the generally accepted assumption that sport helps to break down racial and class barriers in society. Jay Coakley has noted that sport is typically viewed from a “functionalist” perspective that sees it as a positive social influence—most notably in the notion that “sport builds character.”⁴⁵ Sport is also heralded as a site of social mobility, or as a site of social empowerment and social change.⁴⁶ Although some social barriers have been successfully challenged through sport, gender inequalities have gone largely unaddressed, as the hegemonic conception of masculinity in sport persists.⁴⁷ Likewise, the notion that sport is an “apolitical, color-blind meritocracy”⁴⁸ has not proven true, as sociological evidence demonstrates that sport has not moved large numbers of black citizens into higher social class standing. George H. Sage has suggested that celebrating sporting figures as success stories is problematic because “(t)he rags-to-riches stories of individual, high-profile African American athletes disguise the actual reality of how little social mobility results from sports participation.”⁴⁹ When presidents uphold athletes as symbolic embodiments of the American Dream, they mask persistent racial and class inequalities that exclude some citizens from that dream.

By using sport and athletic accomplishment to define or reinforce national values and national identity, does the president exclude other citizens from his ideal vision of “the people?” The answer may depend in part upon *which* sports presidents employ in their rhetoric. In emphasizing football and boxing, for example, the president creates a distinctly different ideal than if he were to draw from golf, tennis, figure skating, or gymnastics. What about citizens who are currently excluded, in large part, from the sporting world—including women, homosexuals, the disabled, and even the un-athletic? Can a citizen who dislikes sports altogether still be considered thoroughly American?

Can sporting discourses still constitute these citizens as part the body politic, or is there a distinct frontier of exclusion that reinforces power hierarchies among citizens?

Identifying the individual athletes who are most often upheld by the president as ideal citizens may also provide insight. In choosing athletes who were exceptions to social power structures in their achievements—like Jessie Owens, Jackie Robinson, Arthur Ashe, or Billie Jean King, for example—presidents can share success stories that inspire fellow citizens and may seem to unite them under common values of determination and perseverance. But in doing so, presidents also may reinscribe dominant narratives about the American Dream while ignoring persistent social inequalities. These ideological implications are illustrated vividly by the four case studies examined in this project.

Chapter Outline

To illustrate how a rhetoric of sport functions for the presidency and for what purposes, I undertake four case studies of presidents who have made the rhetoric of sport and fitness central to their rhetorical leadership: Theodore Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, Gerald Ford, and Barack Obama. Although most twentieth-century presidents have reflected upon their sporting fandom and have engaged in sporting events as participants or spectators, not all of them have successfully incorporated sport into their vision of leadership, citizenship, and national identity. Both Roosevelt and Kennedy were successful in projecting a robust image of youthful energy as president. Examining their rhetoric demonstrates how they connected physical strength with character traits desirable for their visions of ideal American citizenship. When Gerald Ford took office, the

American people knew little else about him but his athletic career. Ford relied upon his athletic experience to speak credibly about how the values associated with sporting success correlated with American ideals. When Barack Obama ran for president, he needed to find rhetorical strategies to overcome the racial tensions surrounding his candidacy. Because he often drew comparisons to barrier-breaking black citizens—most often, athletes like Jackie Robinson, Arthur Ashe, and Tiger Woods—embracing sport became central to Obama’s leadership image. Together, these four presidents set precedents for using sport in their rhetorical leadership to shape their own images, to define the nature of ideal citizenship, and to support their political agendas.

Theodore Roosevelt and the Rhetoric of “the Strenuous Life”

As one of the most charismatic figures to ever occupy the office of the presidency, Theodore Roosevelt has been written about from every perspective imaginable. Yet virtually every account of Roosevelt mentions his physicality and love of sports. In chapter two of this dissertation, I investigate Roosevelt’s rhetoric in an effort to illuminate how sports and physicality functioned in his conception of American citizenship. Roosevelt used a rhetoric of sport and physicality to extol and illustrate the American spirit that ties all citizens together, reconstituting the diverse and fractured body politic of the early twentieth century. Crediting the frontier mentality with making the United States the most powerful nation in the world, Roosevelt firmly linked athletics and physical fitness with military preparedness and strong moral fiber. As president, he contended that the United States would remain a chosen nation only if its citizens, through physical and moral strength, remained committed to a life of service to their

country rather than shrinking from the challenges they faced or the possibility of danger in a hostile global climate. In order to reconstitute the body politic under a banner of physical and moral strength, Roosevelt relied upon his reputation as tough sportsman and disciplined outdoorsman to model the character traits of the ideal citizen. Roosevelt's rhetoric reveals that a lifestyle of physicality, strenuousness, and vigor was not just a personal philosophy, but a doctrine of national character under which he sought to redefine an ideal American citizenship.

John F. Kennedy's Rhetoric of Vigor

During both his campaign and his presidency, Kennedy capitalized on his youthful, vigorous image to define his leadership and set the tone for his administration's policies. In his public campaign emphasizing the importance of youth fitness, Kennedy borrowed a page from Teddy Roosevelt by linking athletics to national character and ideal citizenship, and by equating strong physical fitness with military preparedness and national security in order to mobilize citizens to action. Perhaps most importantly, Kennedy envisioned the responsibility for cultivating national vigor as resting with individual citizens rather than the federal government. Kennedy's drastic expansion of the President's Council on Physical Fitness could not appear to be an imitation of the Soviet program nor an acknowledgment of the Soviet government's success in cultivating a vigorous citizenry primed for international sporting competition. Therefore, Kennedy carefully depicted the American policy as merely providing government support for developmental programs rather than supplying direct government subsidies for compulsory participation—preserving the president's ability to use American sporting

success to argue that the democratic way of life could more effectively produce national strength than the Communist ideology. Examining these discourses reveals how Kennedy was able to effectively issue a mandate for physical fitness that permanently institutionalized sport as part of the executive office. Using a “rhetoric of vigor,” the president framed fitness as a rhetorical crisis that functioned as a Cold War battle of national strength between the two global superpowers.

Gerald Ford and the Rhetoric of Athletic Achievement

When Gerald Ford took office, many Americans had lost their faith in the integrity and respectability of the presidency due to the Watergate scandal. Gerald Ford used the rhetoric of sport and American athletic success to help re-unite the American citizenry and restore pride in the nation. Specifically, I consider the rhetoric of President Gerald R. Ford in honoring the 1976 U.S. Olympic medal winners and his presentation of the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Jesse Owens. By awarding the nation’s highest civilian honor to an athlete for the first time, Ford set a standard for equating athletic achievement with the advancement of democratic values. He symbolically entrenched the notion that athletic success—and not mere participation—is a direct representation and illustration of what it means to be a good American. Ford’s ethos as an accomplished collegiate athlete in his own right afforded him the capacity to place high value on the merit of sport and athletic competition. His understanding of the values associated with athletic achievement cultivated a deeper relationship between U.S. politics and sports. Ford’s rhetoric of athletic achievement, particularly his campaign to support U.S. Olympic athletes, heightened the practice of using athletic success to

celebrate American ideology and set a precedent of publicly honoring victorious American athletes as ideal citizens.

Sport and Race in Barack Obama's 2008 Presidential Campaign

Particularly by relying on basketball, Barack Obama rhetorically employed sport during his campaign to conjure, shape, and reinforce his presidential image as a hip, youthful, urban candidate. In this chapter, I consider the value of sport in relation to the rhetorical construction of presidential image. I analyze Barack Obama's nationally televised ESPN interviews, along with additional sporting moments throughout the campaign, to show how Obama's discursive choices and bodily performances allowed him to address the role that his race would play in his presidential leadership. Through these rhetorical opportunities, Obama effectively used sport as a platform to craft an image that appealed to his voting base and complimented the political vision he hoped to project. In particular, the way in which Obama used basketball and its cultural significance as a "street sport" functioned to help Barack Obama negotiate the racial tensions surrounding his campaign and candidacy. Using basketball, Obama could illustrate his "street" roots while using his athletic performance to distance himself from depictions of black males, and particularly black athletes, as too flashy, aggressive, angry, and selfish. I contend that Obama successfully cultivated a connection with voters through his athletic endeavors and his ability to leverage them to bolster his image. At the same time, however, Obama's reliance on sport in his campaign rhetoric encouraged media narratives suggesting that Obama's election constituted a mythological shift in the presidential image and in the state of American race relations.

Conclusion: Fit for Democracy

A final reflection unifies the case studies of Theodore Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, Gerald Ford, and Barack Obama to discuss the implications of sport as a tool of presidential rhetoric. I suggest that sport is a powerful constitutive tool for presidential rhetoric that informs our conceptions of presidential leadership and the ideals of citizenship. I also suggest that if the ideal citizenship is constituted at least in part through physical strength and other sporting values, the president can ask citizens to make deliberative decisions using those criteria. In particular, sport seems useful in rallying citizens at particular points of crisis, as illustrated by each case study. I also evaluate some of the factors that may determine whether presidents are able to leverage sport successfully. Specifically, I explore the gender implications of linking the presidency to an image of physicality and athleticism. It is hard to imagine, for example, that a presidential candidate like Hillary Clinton, who grew up before the passage of Title IX and the existence of organized girls' sports, could successfully leverage sport in the same ways as her male counterparts. Lastly, I consider the consequences of using sport as a device of constitutive identity. Although sport creates a frontier of exclusion among citizens, the well-established myth that sport functions as a meritocracy and as a site for the production of the American Dream hides the persisting gender, race, and class inequalities among citizens. By examining the interplay among rhetoric, sport, and presidential leadership, I illuminate a more robust conception of how American citizens view themselves and their leaders as "fit" for democracy.

Notes

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² Steve Carlic, "Poll: Obama Tops McCain as Football-Watching Buddy," *The Post Standard*, September 19, 2008, accessed November 24, 2009, http://www.syracuse.com/news/index.ssf/2008/09/poll_obama_tops_mccain_as_foot.html. Obama was the pick over McCain by a narrow 50 percent to 47 percent, according to an Associated Press-Yahoo News poll. No formal poll asked whether voters would rather drink a beer with Obama or McCain.

³ See, for example, Scott Aiken, "A Defense of War and Sport Metaphors in Argument," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 44 (2011): 250-272; Francine Hardaway, "Foul Play: Sports Metaphors as Public Double-Speak," *College English* 38 (1976): 78-82; and Jeffery Bineham, "Some Ethical Implications of Team Sports Metaphors in Politics," *Communication Reports* 4 (1991): 35-42. Numerous political columnists and pundits have written about sports metaphors as well.

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Chapter One: Theodore Roosevelt and the Rhetoric of “the Strenuous Life”

In November 1878, classmates, families, professors, and assorted onlookers gathered at the Harvard College gymnasium for the fall athletic meeting. Junior middle-weight boxer Theodore Roosevelt was poised to begin a match against a senior. After a few minutes of competitive sparring, “time” was called, and Roosevelt obligingly dropped his stance. His opponent, however, did not hear the signal for the end of the round and landed a jab squarely upon Roosevelt’s nose. The punch immediately drew blood, causing the audience to gasp and hiss at the apparent display of bad form on the part of the senior boxer. Roosevelt whirled around to silence the audience, explaining “It’s all right! It’s all right! He didn’t hear the call.” With a friendly smile, Roosevelt then shook his opponent’s hand and nodded to the timekeeper, indicating his desire to continue the contest. One audience member that autumn afternoon was Roosevelt’s Harvard classmate, Owen Wister, who later recalled the incident as evidence of Roosevelt’s character. The incident, according to Wister, was just one of many early demonstrations of the newly elected president’s unique combination of honor and fearlessness, gentlemanly demeanor and toughness.¹

Biographer David McCullough would later dismiss Wister’s boxing story as “manufactured history,” since several newspapers covered the match without mention of the event. Moreover, lost in the tale was the fact that Roosevelt was beaten soundly by his adversary once the match continued.² True or not, the story became part of Roosevelt’s legacy. It rang true with other accounts of the brash, young president’s character. In another popular tale, for instance, Democratic congressman John Costello reportedly insulted Roosevelt at a saloon near the Capitol, calling him a “damned little

dude.” Without hesitation, Roosevelt removed his spectacles and punched Costello. When the Democrat rose to his feet, Roosevelt punched him again for good measure. Then he told Costello to go wash up, before buying him a beer.³

As one of the most charismatic figures to ever occupy the office of the presidency, Theodore Roosevelt has been written about from every perspective imaginable. In virtually all of those accounts, Roosevelt’s toughness and physicality are part of the story. John Milton Cooper, Jr. has written that “the two most noticeable aspects” of Roosevelt’s “self-created character” have been “an openly avowed obsession with physical matters and a spirit of perpetual youthfulness,” and that Roosevelt’s physicality “manifested itself most clearly in his pursuit and promotion of sports and fitness.”⁴ Although he was sickly as a young boy and suffered from bouts of asthma, Roosevelt grew up immersed in athletic culture. Known best as an avid outdoorsman and hunter who embarked on exhilarating excursions to the African game trails and the Amazon, Roosevelt also boxed, learned jujitsu, and dabbled in the fashionable blue blood sport of tennis.⁵ Despite his privileged New England background and Harvard education, Roosevelt also embraced the rigors of life on the Western frontier. His experiences as a rancher in the Badlands of Dakota territory set the stage for the legend of his charge up San Juan Hill during the Spanish-American War. Roosevelt’s frontier adventures also provided fodder for his successful political career, during which he delivered numerous speeches and wrote many popular essays about the importance of the rugged frontier experience to the strength and character of the nation.

In 1899, Theodore Roosevelt issued one of his most famous political doctrines when he urged Americans to take up “the strenuous life, the life of toil and effort, of

labor and strife.” He argued that the “highest form of success . . . comes, not to the man who desires mere easy peace, but to the man who does not shrink from danger, from hardship, or from bitter toil.”⁶ “The Strenuous Life,” in other words, was not merely a healthy lifestyle but a doctrine of distinctive personal and national character, which Roosevelt suggested would be the key to the nation’s future success. Because of the nation’s frontier history, America had built a national character rooted in rugged individualism, and if the nation hoped to lead the world in the twentieth century it would need to sustain that character through strenuous exertion. As Americans, Roosevelt argued, “We do not admire the man of timid peace. We admire the man who embodies victorious effort.”⁷ To maintain this brand of national character, Roosevelt argued, America would have to resist modern trends toward luxury and leisure, as “a healthy state can exist only when the men and women who make it up lead clean, vigorous, healthy lives; when the children are so trained that they shall endeavor, not to shirk difficulties, but to overcome them; not to seek ease, but to know how to wrest triumph from toil and risk.”⁸

This chapter investigates how Theodore Roosevelt’s deployed a rhetoric of sport and physicality to shape not only his own personal image but also his normative conception of American citizenship and national character. Roosevelt used the rhetoric of sport and physicality to extol and illustrate a particular conception of the American spirit that he hoped would bring all Americans together behind an ideology of national greatness and world leadership. Crediting the frontier experience with making the United States the most powerful nation in the world, Roosevelt linked athletics and physical fitness with military preparedness and moral leadership on the world stage. As president,

he portrayed the United States as a chosen nation destined to lead. Yet, according to Roosevelt, America could realize that destiny only if its citizens, through physical and moral discipline, remained committed to a “strenuous life” of service and sacrifice. Rather than shrinking from the challenges and dangers the nation faced in the world, Roosevelt urged his fellow Americans to embrace the manly, courageous, and muscular “life of strife”⁹ and to “face the responsibilities that must be faced by all great nations.”¹⁰

Throughout his life, Roosevelt embodied the physical and moral strength he championed rhetorically, cultivating a reputation as a tough athlete and a disciplined outdoorsman—the character traits he then associated with the ideal citizen, and in turn, a collective American character. As a child, he strove to overcome his physical limitations through sheer determination, and as he matured his personal correspondence and political writings were filled with reflections on the importance of sport and physical exertion to the development of moral character, both in individuals and in the nation. Roosevelt’s rhetoric reveals that he considered physicality and the “strenuous life” important, not just for the individual, but for a nation aspiring to world leadership. Understanding the relationship between physicality and Roosevelt’s conception of American character illuminates how TR came to represent what John Murphy has called the “heroic tradition in presidential rhetoric.”¹¹ Indeed, Roosevelt has become the touchstone for that ideal of presidential leadership—the one president who best embodied the heroic tradition.

TR and the Rhetorical Challenges of the Progressive Era

The Progressive Era is often characterized as an “historical enigma,” a time period when diverse ideological battles were waged in the name of reform and progress.¹² Although they disagreed on policy specifics, J. Michael Hogan has argued that self-described Progressives all “sensed the need for fundamental reforms in response to rapid social change and unprecedented political challenges.”¹³ The turn-of-the-century had brought dramatic changes to the nation, resulting from the industrialization and urbanization of the post-Civil War era, along with an influx of new immigrants. Progressives faced political challenges ranging from rapid technological change and economic and racial inequalities to fragmented communities and civic decay. As the president who governed throughout much of the first decade of the Progressive Era, Roosevelt was faced with meeting those challenges and rallying the nation around a vision of social reform and “progress.” As president, he ushered in “a *rhetorical renaissance* that changed how Americans *talked* about politics and society.”¹⁴

Leroy Dorsey has argued that Roosevelt responded to the era’s social challenges with a “rhetorical progressivism” anchored in the belief that genuine and lasting social reform could come only from the character of individual Americans. Democratic citizenship rested upon moral and physical strength. Moreover, Roosevelt reasoned that what was true of the individual was also true of the nation.¹⁵ In turn, Roosevelt’s policies “constituted a distinctive brand of progressivism,” one that “placed more emphasis on attitudinal than structural reform.” Roosevelt’s rhetorical progressivism, therefore, focused on improvements in American character, “hoping to build a moral

foundation for political, economic, and social progress.”¹⁶ Throughout Roosevelt’s rhetoric, a well-defined conception of “Americanism” thus emerged, wherein “real citizens” recognized the importance of physical and moral strength.

TR grounded his version of Americanism in the frontier myth: the heroic archetype of the American West. Roosevelt employed the frontier myth to help citizens make sense of the changes that were taking place in the nation and to encourage support for his agenda of world leadership. The frontier myth provided a convenient trope for Americans trying to get a grasp on the new challenges of modernization. Most significantly, the frontier myth allowed Roosevelt to rhetorically construct opportunities for citizens to assimilate, make a difference, and thereby to become real Americans.¹⁷

Examining more closely how TR constituted the body politic in his rhetoric helps illuminate how Progressivism was “an implicit faith in the power of words to change the world for the better.”¹⁸ As president, Roosevelt helped Americans imagine how, through strenuous exertion, they might become better Americans, and he cultivated his own reputation as the embodiment of that ideal. Finally, his conception of ideal citizenship—rooted in vigor, discipline, obedience, and physical service to the nation—allowed Roosevelt to prepare the nation for a new role in the world, one that eventually would embroil the nation in war and make it an imperial power.

Sportsman in Training

Theodore Roosevelt practiced what Dana Anderson has termed “the rhetorical strategy of identity,” using autobiographical narratives to influence others toward certain

beliefs and actions.¹⁹ Roosevelt's writings are replete with accounts of his physical exploits, including volumes dedicated solely to chronicling his ranching adventures, hunting exploits, and his excursions to Africa and South America. These texts provide rich insight into TR's view of the role of physicality in the development of his own character and, in turn, the role he thought physicality should play in defining and motivating the true "American."

As a child, Theodore, or "Teedee" Roosevelt, was frail and suffered from severe asthma, persistent headaches, fevers, stomach pains, and "intestinal groanings."²⁰ At the time, asthma was believed to be condition brought about by nervousness. Aware of this, young Teedee at times would even warn his mother and father, "Don't scold me, or I shall have the asthma."²¹ Roosevelt was, in fact, often nervous as a boy. He had a recurring nightmare that a werewolf was coming at him from the bottom of his bed.²² His father prescribed walking and horseback riding as treatment—but with little success. Then in 1870, at age twelve, Roosevelt's father insisted to his son, "You must *make* your body." The senior Roosevelt arranged for young Teedee and his brother Elliott to train with prizefighter John Wood, whose other young protégés included children of the Sloanes and the Vanderbilts. Wood's teachings were supposed to benefit both character and physique, with drills involving weights, punching bags, and horizontal bars. Teedee's progress was slow, almost negligible for some time. In the meantime, the young Roosevelt found an alternate way to embrace the outdoors—by studying ornithology, taxonomy, and natural history.²³

At age fourteen, Roosevelt experienced a breakthrough. While riding by himself on a stagecoach to Moosehead Lake, he was bullied by two other boys his age. In his

autobiography, Roosevelt remarked: “The worst feature was that when I finally tried to fight them I discovered that either one singly could not only handle me with easy contempt, but handle me so as not to hurt me much and yet to prevent my doing any damage whatever in return.”²⁴ A frustrated Roosevelt became more determined than ever to improve his physical strength, remarking “I felt a great admiration for men who were fearless and who could hold their own in the world, and I had a great desire to be like them.”²⁵ He recommitted himself to his training with his boxing master, and surprisingly he won a lightweight competition among the pupils.²⁶ Around this time, Roosevelt received his first gun as a gift from his father—a 12-gauge, double-barreled French-made shotgun. He also got his first pair of spectacles, which made a remarkable difference in his confidence. In 1872 Roosevelt took his first trip to the Nile with his father, as he was finally growing in size and strength.²⁷

As an exuberant teen in Oyster Bay, Roosevelt’s obsessions were running and jumping, and hunting and collecting.²⁸ Between the ages of sixteen to eighteen, he kept a “sporting calendar,” recording his physical education program from August 21, 1875 to December 25, 1877. He meticulously recorded his achievements in 100-yard races, standing jumps, running jumps, and vaulting. He tracked every occasion on which he boxed and wrestled, noting his opponent and whether he won or lost. Periodically, he noted his own physical measurements, including height, weight, chest, waist, thigh, shoulders, and forearm. He also continued his study of the natural sciences, writing an account of each of his hunting or fishing excursions by listing the number and kind of species he killed or caught.²⁹

At Harvard, Roosevelt exhibited a newfound confidence. His asthma seemed to almost miraculously disappear, and he seemed transformed by his new environment.³⁰ In the classroom, he constantly asked questions and tried to pin down his instructors.³¹ To continue his physical conditioning, he concentrated on boxing and wrestling not only because of his familiarity with the sports, but also because Harvard had weight divisions that allowed him to compete fairly successfully against peers of his own size. He described to his father his daily routine after class: “I go over to the gymnasium, where I have a set-to with the gloves with ‘General’ Lister, the boxing master—for I am training to box among the lightweights in the approaching match for the championship of Harvard.”³² Roosevelt also became a football fan, which he surely would have played if he had the size or the athletic ability. Despite his small stature, Roosevelt earned a reputation among his peers for his fierce physical determination. Classmate Richard Welling once asked him to go ice skating, expecting a light workout given Roosevelt’s size. The two classmates arrived at the pond to find the ice rough and the surface unprotected from the arctic wind. Welling wanted to forego the skating, but Roosevelt tore out onto the ice without hesitation: “Roosevelt was exclaiming, ‘Isn’t this bully!’—and the harder it blew and the worse we skated, the more often I had to hear ‘Isn’t this bully!’”³³

Between his sophomore and junior years, Roosevelt traveled to Maine for a hunting expedition. There he met William Sewall, a lumberman who supplemented his income by guiding hunters from a base at the woodland hamlet of Island Falls. Roosevelt considered it a personal test of his manhood and strength to keep up with Sewall, to prove that the rugged and the refined could coexist. He succeeded not only in passing his test,

but in earning a lifelong friend.³⁴ Although Roosevelt had grown more confident than ever in his physical capabilities, his body sometimes still resisted. Just prior to his graduation from Harvard, a doctor diagnosed him with a heart condition and advised him to avoid strenuous exercise. Roosevelt responded in typical fashion with unwavering determination: “Doctor, I am going to do all the things you tell me not to do. If I’ve got to live the sort of life you have described, I don’t care how short it is.”³⁵ Roosevelt never forgot the feelings of insecurity his physical ailments caused him as a boy and how hard he had to work to overcome them. As historian John Milton Cooper, has explained, he carried those feelings into adulthood, sometimes engaging in seemingly reckless pursuits.³⁶ Among those risks were the challenges he faced as a rancher in the Badlands of North Dakota, an experience that had a lasting impact both on his physical development and his ideas and attitudes.

Ranchman and Hunter-Naturalist

After being elected to the New York State Assembly at age 23, Roosevelt attended the Republican National Convention in 1884, but he found himself disillusioned by the party politics he witnessed. His disenchantment, along with the crippling grief he must have suffered following the death of his first wife, Alice, prompted Roosevelt to seek an early retirement from his political career. He had purchased a ranch in the Badlands of the Dakota Territory during a buffalo hunting expedition the previous year, and he made it his new aspiration to live the life of a ranchman. His retirement to the ranch would in fact shape his future return to politics more than he could have imagined.

Edmund Morris explained, “Roosevelt the modern statesman clearly owed much to his youthful cultivation of, and acceptance by, frontiersman of the hardest and most violent sort. A man who could earn the respect of such ‘desperados,’ and write about them with such unsentimental empathy, was unlikely to be fazed by eruptions of the primitive in the behavior of senators, or for that matter, of plenipotentiaries.”³⁷

As an inexperienced rancher on the Northern Plains, he earned respect by showing no fear of the resident roughnecks. A local cattle boss once tried to intimidate him through several intermediaries. Taking matters into his own hands, Roosevelt directly confronted the cattle boss: “I understand that you have threatened to kill me on sight. I have come over to see when you want to begin the killing and to let you know that, if you have anything to say against me, now is the time for you to say it.”³⁸ Because he was just an average rider, not to mention a bespectacled “dude” from out East, the more seasoned ranchers enjoyed some laughter at his expense. One night at a saloon just across the Montana line, an unknown drunken cowboy with a gun in each hand was making fun of Roosevelt, calling him “four eyes.” Quietly and unceremoniously, Roosevelt knocked him out cold with one punch, earning newfound respect across the region.³⁹ Donald Day speculated that his experiences out West added a “touch of peril” to his life that made Roosevelt like the Badlands even more.⁴⁰ In his writings about ranch life, Roosevelt describes the lawlessness of the Northern Plains, including various “frontier types”: desperadoes, horse and cattle thieves, claim jumpers, outlaws, and drunkards. Of course, he cast himself in the role of the sheriff—law-abiding himself and dedicated to the maintenance of law and order.⁴¹ He even wrote to Henry Cabot Lodge

from Medora, Dakota on April 16, 1886 boasting of his adventure catching three horse thieves.⁴²

Roosevelt's numerous publications about ranch life were popular because he conveyed a sincere appreciation for the American cowboy.⁴³ His ranching rhetoric romanticized the quality and character of Western life for readers. He argued that the hunter was "the arch-type of freedom" because "(h)is well-being rests in no man's hands save his own."⁴⁴ For Roosevelt, ranching was a superior way to make a living because it was "an occupation like those of vigorous, primitive pastoral peoples, having little in common with the humdrum, workaday business world of the nineteenth century; and the free ranchman in his manner of life shows more kinship to an Arab sheik than to a sleek city merchant or tradesman."⁴⁵ Roosevelt further contrasted the ranchman with the city businessman: "against the grim harshness of their existence they set the strength and the abounding vitality that come with it. They run risks to life and limb that are unknown to the dwellers in cities."⁴⁶ Unlike the work of an industry man, Roosevelt argued that ranching was a fulfilling enterprise: "The men are good-humored, bold, and thoroughly interested in their business, continually vying with one another in the effort to see which can do the work best. It is superbly health-giving, and is full of excitement and adventure, calling for the exhibition of pluck, self-reliance, hardihood, and dashing horsemanship; and of all forms of physical labor the easiest and pleasantest is to sit in the saddle."⁴⁷

Roosevelt's tales of the Northern Plains showed how ordinary men might build their civic character by living the life of the cowboy. In his autobiographical account, *The Rough Riders*, he declared that "(a)ny man, if he chooses, can gradually school

himself to the requisite nerve, and gradually learn the requisite seat and hands, that will enable him to do respectably across country, or to perform the average work on a ranch.”⁴⁸ Roosevelt portrayed ranching as a matter of bravery, determination, discipline, and practice rather than innate skill or physical aptitude: “After he has achieved the ability to exercise wariness and judgment and the control over his nerves which will make him shoot as well at the game as at a target, he can begin his essays at dangerous game hunting, and he will then find that it does not demand such abnormal prowess as the outsider is apt to imagine.”⁴⁹

Roosevelt developed a deep sense of personal identity from his ranching adventures, and he also became a vociferous advocate of environmentally sound sportsmanship. His campaign in support of the values of the “hunter-naturalist” may have in part given him cause to return to politics, and he promoted a code of sporting ethics throughout the rest of his public life. As president, Roosevelt used his well-publicized hunting and camping trips to introduce the nation to the idea of conservation. Embarking on numerous sporting and hiking excursions allowed him to make important political contacts and to speak all over the country.⁵⁰ Roosevelt was even the first presidential candidate to campaign in the West, embarking on a two-month, fourteen-thousand mile vote-getting tour in the spring of 1903.⁵¹

Roosevelt insisted that anybody could learn from nature, provided that they practiced an ethical respect for the outdoors. In *Outdoor Pastimes of an American Hunter*, he declared, “Camping out, and therefore the cultivation of the capacity to live in the open, and the education of the faculties which teach observation, resourcefulness, self-reliance, are within the reach of all who really care for the life of the woods, the

fields, and the waters.”⁵² He even wrote a concluding chapter titled “At Home,” in which he detailed numerous outdoor activities, nature observations, and animal sightings he experienced with his children in their own back yard—implying that readers could have similar experiences with their own children in their own backyards. Yet many of Roosevelt’s outdoor adventures were clearly beyond the reach of ordinary citizen. In 1909, for instance, he famously embarked on an African safari, during which he bagged an impressive collection of lions, elephants, rhinoceroses, hippopotamuses, zebra, giraffes, buffalo, ostriches, and pythons.⁵³ In his detailed account of the expedition, published by *Scribner’s*, Roosevelt wrote: “there are no words that can tell the hidden spirit of the wilderness, that can reveal its mystery, its melancholy, and its charm. There is delight in the hardy life of the open, in long rides rifle in hand, in the thrill of the fight with dangerous game.”⁵⁴ (He did not mention that he traveled first class with comfortable tents, warm baths, and gourmet food, or that he often stayed in the houses of British aristocrats who had settled in Africa.⁵⁵)

In late fall of 1913 through the following spring, Roosevelt undertook an exploration of the Amazon, again with his son Kermit and an expedition team. Their efforts produced significant new geographical data. The Brazilian government named one newly explored tributary the “Rio Roosevelt.”⁵⁶ Roosevelt arranged the South American expedition with institutional backing from the American Museum of Natural History and the Brazilian government. He also arranged publicity in the form of a series of articles he would write for *Scribner’s*.⁵⁷ His account highlighted the heroism of the explorers who braved perils to extend the realm of scientific knowledge and modern civilization. In fact, the expedition was very challenging due to the rapids and waterfalls,

which in several instances cost the travelers their canoes. There were also challenges from dwindling food and supplies and the threat of exposure to disease.⁵⁸ The trip's hazards no doubt stimulated as well as challenged Roosevelt who, even as he aged, would never admit to weakness.

Return to Politics: Raging Against American Softness

Roosevelt returned east after the harsh winter of 1886-1887 wiped out much of his cattle herd. He settled into Sagamore Hill, the home he had built in Oyster Bay, New York, and embarked on his second marriage to Edith Carow. Feeling renewed by his adventures on the Northern Plains, Roosevelt was determined to bring a bit of western vigor back to eastern politics and public life. He got his chance when President Benjamin Harrison, whom Roosevelt had helped campaign for office, appointed him to the United States Civil Service Commission in 1888—a position which later propelled him to the post of New York City Police Commissioner.

Having returned to his political career, Roosevelt was concerned that his more leisurely lifestyle would weaken him physically. He expressed as much in a letter to his sister and brother-in-law, Douglas and Corinne Robinson, on July 28, 1889, referring to his upcoming plans to hunt bears in the Rockies: “Struggle as I will, my life seems to grow more and more sedentary, and I am rapidly sinking into a fat and lazy middle age. ... I am so out of training that I look forward with acute physical terror to going up the first mountain.”⁵⁹ He later offered the same advice to others with deskbound jobs,

declaring that “a man whose business is sedentary should get some kind of exercise if he wishes to keep himself in as good physical trim as his brethren who do manual labor.”⁶⁰

As Roosevelt’s public stature increased, he became even more obsessed with maintaining his fitness. When he became governor of New York, he expressed outrage that the state comptroller would not authorize public funds for a wrestling mat, but that he would permit a billiard table.⁶¹ By the time he became president, Roosevelt worried that his physical prowess had declined, declaring that he had grown both “fat and stiff.” He lamented that “I do but little boxing because it seems rather absurd for a president to appear with a black eye or a swollen nose or a cut lip.”⁶² In fact, as president, a doctor forbid Roosevelt from boxing after he permanently damaged his eye from a right cross, which is why he turned to jujitsu as an alternative.⁶³ To his sons Kermit and Ted he described in detail the injuries he incurred taking up Japanese wrestling in the White House, assuring them that if American wrestlers and boxers were to receive training in the art, they would surely be able to use their superior size and strength to dominate the Japanese jujitsu experts.⁶⁴ However, Roosevelt so admired the skills cultivated by Japanese wrestling that, in 1906, he recommended jujitsu training to the U.S. Naval Academy as “an extraordinarily successful means of self-defense and training in dexterity and decision.”⁶⁵

A president practicing jujitsu in the White House drew considerable attention from the press. Roosevelt also raised eyebrows when he famously engaged in an exercise called “singlesticks” with Army Chief of Staff Leonard Wood. During this event, both men put on helmets and body pads and fought with large ash rods. Newspapers also reported an incident in which Roosevelt went fox hunting on the north shore of Long

Island near Sagamore Hill. The president reportedly fell off his horse and broke his left arm, but got back on his horse and finished the hunt.⁶⁶ Biographer Kathleen Dalton remarked that “Americans had never seen a president like TR.” He went rock-climbing, sparred with professional prizefighters, held a White House exhibition match between a top American wrestler and a Japanese jujitsu expert, went riding rain or shine, and regularly took twenty-mile walks to display his vigor. When Roosevelt first took office, he was so young that the press joked about him playing ball in the White House backyard. Therefore, Dalton explained, he “knew he had to act presidential or change the meaning of the word.”⁶⁷

Roosevelt was eager to impress his philosophy of physical vigor upon the American citizenry. He argued that “in our modern highly artificial, and on the whole congested, civilization, no boon to the race could be greater than the acquisition by the average man of that bodily habit”—the habit of lifelong sports and exercise.⁶⁸ He was particularly concerned about overcivilization, fearing that the upper classes had become too “dainty” to fight against the moral decay of society.⁶⁹ He worried about “a certain softness of fibre [sic] in civilized nations which, if it were to prove progressive, might mean the development of a cultured and refined people quite unable to hold its own in those conflicts through which alone any great race can ultimately march to victory.” He feared that industrial life promoted “a tendency to become fixed, and to lose flexibility.”⁷⁰ Benjamin G. Rader explained that Roosevelt’s advocacy of a strenuous life had larger rhetorical purposes: “Through more strenuous living, he hoped to rejuvenate his own social class, which he believed had become too soft and effeminate. Once physically strengthened, they could provide capable national leadership.”⁷¹

But Roosevelt's vision also carried a moral agenda. He feared that eastern men were turning into "narrow-chested, pale, degenerated, or overcivilized creatures who had forgotten how to breed and fight well." His celebration of the American frontier thus had a larger purpose: to inspire eastern men to become "as hearty as Kentuckians or French Canadian woodsmen."⁷² For Roosevelt, true American heroes were hunters like Daniel Boone, who were "tall, lean, brown men for the most part, with coonskin caps, buckskin shirts, powder horns and long straight squirrel rifles. They moved with the rapid silence of the woodsman and independence was bred in their bones."⁷³ He consistently revered such self-reliant and fearless figures in *Hero Tales from American History*.⁷⁴

Roosevelt seemed to worry that the erosion of frontier life would correspond with an erosion of American strength and leadership. In his book *Colonial Policies of the United States*, he credited the frontier spirit with creating the American legacy of greatness:

Indeed it was these backwater men who, leaving their frontier homes unguarded, streamed back over the ranges, defeated a gallant British colonel at the battle of Kings Mountain, and struck on of the most important blows for American freedom. These pioneering days have left a deep imprint on our national character.

Foreigners would understand far better our faults and our virtues if, instead of contenting themselves merely with visiting a few large cities, they would go to the smaller cities and the country side. It is they that control our nation and it is they that bear the imprint deepest, for countryfolk are slow to forget.⁷⁵

Therefore, Roosevelt's hunting and wilderness trips as president served a dual purpose: to maintain his own physical health and to instruct others in the proper development of moral and physical vigor. He was attempting to both preach and practice the "strenuous life."

Roosevelt also linked physicality directly to the nation's military preparedness. He claimed that sport served a useful purpose in breeding the traits which comprise an effective soldier: "Cavalrymen and infantrymen, who do not need special technical knowledge, are easily developed out of men who are already soldiers in the rough, that is, who, in addition to the essential qualities of manliness and character, the qualities of resolution, daring, and intelligence, which go to make up the 'fighting edge,' also possess physical hardihood; who can live in the open, walk long distances, ride, shoot, and endure fatigue, hardship, and exposure."⁷⁶ Physical training, Roosevelt asserted, was the best way to instill the bravery, pluck, and fearlessness essential for the survival of the American nation. Roosevelt flatly rejected the ideal of universal peace, implying that its adherents merely perpetuated softness by ignoring the necessity of being prepared to fight. Reinforcing this stance was another of Roosevelt's famous adages: "Peace is a goddess only when she comes with sword girt on thigh."⁷⁷

Roosevelt contended that America's growing softness was placing the nation in a vulnerable and precarious position. He declared that "if in its citizenship rugged strength and fealty to the common welfare are lacking, then no brilliancy of intellect and no piled-up material prosperity will avail to save the nation from destruction."⁷⁸ Overcivilization, Roosevelt argued, had skewed the nation's ideals toward greed and covetousness rather than moral strength and refinement. He speculated: "Unless men are willing to fight and

die for great ideals, including love of country, ideals will vanish, and the world will become one huge sty of materialism. And unless the women of ideals bring forth the men who are ready thus to live and die, the world of the future will be filled by the spawn of the unfit.”⁷⁹ Fond of the dire prediction, Roosevelt prophesized that “we may someday have bitter cause to realize that a rich nation which is slothful, timid, or unwieldy is an easy prey for any people which still retains those most valuable of all qualities, the soldierly virtues.”⁸⁰ One of his last works was his volume *National Strength and International Duty*, published in 1917 as a call for military preparedness. He argued that many soldiers were ill-equipped for the rigors of battle because “(t)he love of easy living, the weakening of the sense of collective duty, had made the idea of self-sacrifice very unpleasant.”⁸¹

Accordingly, Roosevelt consistently advocated throughout his political career that Americans must “strive to build up those fighting qualities for the lack of which in a nation, as in an individual, no refinement, no culture, no wealth, no material prosperity, can atone.”⁸² The president even took a hands-on approach to ensuring the physical prowess of military leaders. He was adamant in his desire that American soldiers possess a “fighting edge,” but also insisted that “the finest natural fighting edge is utterly useless unless the soldieries and the junior officers have been through months, and the officers of higher command and the general staff through years, of hard, weary, intensive training.”⁸³ For that reason, Roosevelt liked to personally inspect the physical capabilities of enlistees. He often asked them to accompany him on long outdoor treks to evaluate their strength and endurance.⁸⁴

Army Chief of Staff Leonard Wood recalled that Roosevelt would take officers who were applicants for promotion on “tryouts” that involved crossing and recrossing rivers and scrambling about the banks of creeks when high water made it hard to walk. If an officer could not keep up with the president, he would not be selected for promotion. Roosevelt believed that senior officers who would command during war had to be physically fit as well as mentally fit—and that such a test encompassed both aspects of robust health.⁸⁵ Roosevelt was sometimes criticized for this practice, but he defended it vehemently: “To follow any other course is to put a premium on slothful incapacity, and to do the gravest wrong to the Nation.”⁸⁶

Physicality, Sport, and the American Character

Hunter and guide Elwood “Billy” Hofer provides a typical depiction of Roosevelt’s character while recalling a hunt with the statesman. Without warning, Roosevelt’s horse bucked and threw him three times. Hofer offered to change horses, but Roosevelt refused.⁸⁷ As a public figure, Roosevelt loved cultivating an image steeped in grit, determination, and fearlessness. He was also fond of preaching these virtues to his fellow citizens, arguing that “the kind of people we are determines the kind of nation we have.”⁸⁸ Roosevelt was very clear about what he meant by character:

By character I mean the sum of those qualities, distinct from the purely intellectual qualities, which are essential to moral efficiency. Among them are resolution, courage, energy, power of self-control, combined with fearlessness in taking the initiative and assuming responsibility, and a just regard for the rights of

others, together with unflinching determination to one's self to succeed no matter what obstacles and barriers have to be beaten down.⁸⁹

For Roosevelt, these character traits—both for the individual and the nation—and defined by the same qualities in both cases. In October of 1897, just as he was poised to become a national political figure, Roosevelt wrote a treatise on American ideals. In the introduction, he declared: “To borrow a simile from the football field, we believe that men must play fair, but that there must be no shirking, and that success can only come to the player who ‘hits the line hard.’”⁹⁰

For Roosevelt, the ultimate measure of character was service to one's fellow citizens or to the nation. He declared that “no man or woman can really be happy unless he or she is doing service.”⁹¹ In turn, he associated good service with physicality. “A politician who really serves his country well, and deserves his country's gratitude,” he wrote, “must usually possess some of the hardy virtues which we admire in the soldier who serves his country well in the field.”⁹² According to Roosevelt, military service was the best way to build character in the individual citizen, but any kind of service could help build the character of young men who, because of urbanization and other culture changes, had been deprived of the character-building experience of outdoor life. TR even advocated universal service, stipulating that every man between the ages of eighteen and twenty spend at least six months in a training camp that included some field service. In his arguments supporting this idea, he repeatedly emphasized that such a policy would not only strengthen the nation, but also promote character development. Such service, Roosevelt argued, could teach every young man “self-reliance, self-respect, mutuality of respect between himself and others, the power to command and the power to obey.” It

also would promote “habits of cleanliness and order and the power of co-operation.”

Above all, it would teach “devotion to the flag” and “the ideal of country.”⁹³

If “strength” operated for Roosevelt as the foundation of character development, it was not solely physical strength. In *The Rough Riders*, he explained that his “philosophy of bodily vigor” was “a method of getting that vigor of soul without which vigor of the body counts for nothing.”⁹⁴ Rather than a brute physicality, in other words, Roosevelt’s conception of vigor involved a balance of bodily and moral strength, as Leroy Dorsey has observed. Roosevelt argued that “No one quality or one virtue is enough to insure success; vigor, honesty, common sense—all are needed.”⁹⁵ He insisted that someone interested in politics needed to possess “the rougher, manlier virtues, and above all the virtue of personal courage, physical as well as moral.”⁹⁶ Brute physicality was useless, even dangerous, Roosevelt suggested, without moral decency, whether in close personal relationships or in politics. He posited that “it is a might unsafe thing to proceed upon the assumption that because a man is ordinarily a brute he will therefore be a hero in crisis.”⁹⁷ Instead, he preached that Americans must “be vigorous in mind and body, able to hold our own in rough conflict with our fellows, able to suffer punishment without flinching, and, at need, to repay it in kind with full interest.”⁹⁸

Roosevelt advocated that, although physical pursuits could undertaken for mere play or leisure, physical activities ideally would promote loftier goals. Sports and the outdoor life functioned as training for life, instilling the character virtues needed for strong bodies and minds:

The best among vigorous out-of-door sports should be more than pastimes. Play is good for play’s sake, within moderate limits, especially if it is athletic play, and

again within moderate limits, if is good because a healthy body helps toward healthiness of mind. But if play serves only either of these ends, it does not deserve the serious consideration which rightly attaches to play which in itself fits a man to do things worth doing; and there exists no creature much more contemptible than a man past his first youth who leads a life devoted to mere sport, without thought of the serious work of life.⁹⁹

Athletic play, he contended, should prepare one for service, not substitute for service, because “a life devoted merely to play” was, “of all forms of existence, the most dismal.”¹⁰⁰ Making sport the end of life rather than a means to a life of service constituted a “perversion,” according to Roosevelt.¹⁰¹ This message of balance between body and mind, play and service, was one TR routinely impressed upon his sons in his written correspondence.

Roosevelt often discussed the relationship between physicality and character in his letters to his eldest son Ted, who was studying at Groton boarding school at the time. Pleased that Ted was able to pursue football—a sport which the senior Roosevelt was too small and uncoordinated to play—TR praised his son for his athletic achievements while cautioning him about becoming too obsessed with the sport. In a letter to Ted from the White House in 1903, Roosevelt wrote:

I am delighted to have you play football. I believe in rough, manly sports. But I do not believe in them if they degenerate into the sole end of any one's existence. I don't want you to sacrifice standing well in your studies to any overathleticism; and I need not tell you that character counts for a great deal more than either intellect or body in winning success in life. Athletic proficiency is a

mighty good servant, and like so many other good servants, a mighty bad master. Did you ever read Pliny's letter to Trajan, in which he speaks of its being advisable to keep the Greeks absorbed in athletics, because it distracted their minds from all serious pursuits, including soldiering, and prevented their ever being dangerous to the Romans?¹⁰²

Not only did Roosevelt stress a balance between physical strength and moral or spiritual strength, but he also had very pronounced opinions on which forms of sport best cultivated the right kind of character. He advocated for the most strenuous forms of athletic pursuit—hunting, horseback riding, rowing, wrestling, boxing, and football—activities that featured the greatest levels of exertion, bodily combat, and danger. Only these sports functioned to cultivate the kind of physical strength and moral character that Roosevelt considered necessary for a life of engaged citizenship. He upheld horsemanship as a solid test of athletic prowess.¹⁰³ He played tennis rather poorly, but used the fashionable blueblood sport to bring a spirit of athletic vigor to the White House, forming the “Tennis Cabinet”—of which legendary Deadwood sheriff Seth Bullock was a member.¹⁰⁴ However, he much preferred polo to tennis or golf, reasoning that polo had “all the fun of football, with the horse thrown in.”¹⁰⁵ Although it was growing in popularity as the national pastime, Roosevelt did not care much for baseball because it overemphasized the pitcher's ability to deceive the batter. He opined that the curve ball, for instance, was “a low form of cunning.”¹⁰⁶ Rowing was an appropriately vigorous exploit, in Roosevelt's estimation, but he shunned sailing and motor boating.¹⁰⁷

Boxing, not surprisingly, was among Roosevelt's favorite sports. He often dismissed public protests that boxing was too savage and brutal: “I have never been able

to sympathize with the outcry against prize-fighters. The only objection I have to the prize ring is the crookedness that has attended its commercial development.”¹⁰⁸ He even argued that prize fighting was not nearly as brutal or immoral as the business that had grown up around the sport.¹⁰⁹ As governor of New York, he even pushed for the passage of a bill that would have banned staging professional boxing matches for money; he eventually signed that proposal into law.¹¹⁰ Meanwhile, he defended amateur boxing on the grounds that it gave young men a way to channel their aggression—aggression that might otherwise manifest itself in criminal activities:

When I was Police Commissioner I found (and Jacob Riis will back me up in this) that the establishment of a boxing club in a rough neighborhood always tended to do away with knifing and gun-fighting among the young fellows who would otherwise have been in murderous gangs. Many of these young fellows were not naturally criminals at all, but they had to have some outlet for their activities.¹¹¹

Football also met with Roosevelt’s approval, but he had the “odd idea that the ball carrier ought always to do the manly thing and hit the most resistant part of the enemy’s line, not look for holes.”¹¹² He apparently believed so strongly in the merits of football that he even encouraged organized intercollegiate competition. On August 17, 1897, for instance, he wrote to General Russell Alexander Alger inquiring about the possibility of reviving the Army-Navy football game, which had been suspended because of excessive in-game violence, including a notorious incident between a Rear Admiral and a Brigadier General.¹¹³ He also wrote to Captain Norman Winslow Cabot from Washington on November 23, 1897, urging that the following year’s Harvard football team be pushed to

do better against their rivals at Yale.¹¹⁴ As collegiate football grew in popularity, Roosevelt even took to the bully pulpit to advocate higher standards for competition and fair play. He frequently criticized universities for what he perceived to be abuses of the amateur code. In October 1905, for example, he invited representatives from Harvard, Yale, and Princeton to the White House to discuss the growing brutality and lack of sportsmanship in the game.¹¹⁵

It should be unsurprising that Roosevelt sneered at the whole idea of spectator sports and mere spectatorship as a form of athletic participation. As he told a group of undergraduates at the Harvard Union on February 23, 1907, “it is of far more importance that a man should play something himself, even if he plays it badly, than that he should go with hundreds of companions to see someone else play well.”¹¹⁶ Once again, what was true for the individual was true for the nation. The United States would not be a spectator to the challenges of global politics. Tracing this philosophy back to “The Strenuous Life,” Roosevelt insisted, “We cannot, if we would, play the part of China, and be content to rot by inches in ignoble ease within our borders, taking no interest in what goes on beyond them, sunk in a scrambling commercialism.”¹¹⁷ Instead, a great nation must strive to play a great role in the world, for: “Thrice happy is the nation that has a glorious history. Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs, even though checkered by failure, than to take rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy much nor suffer much, because they live in the gray twilight that knows not victory nor defeat.”¹¹⁸

Conclusion

As a doctrine of national character, Roosevelt's "strenuous life" rested upon a rhetoric of physicality that associated sports and a vigorous outdoor life with moral virtue, and Roosevelt personally sought to embody that ideal of citizenship in his own life. TR wrote of his own childhood frailties as something he *chose* to overcome through sheer determination and hard work. He depicted himself as growing not only in strength but also in confidence, courage, and character, which equipped him for a successful life of public service. Recalling how the Badlands helped him "find himself," Roosevelt portrayed his ranching experiences on the Northern Plains as a test of his rugged individualism. He cast hunters, ranchers, and cowboys as the heroic symbols of true Americanism. Fearing that overcivilization and industrialization were eroding the frontier spirit at the foundation of America's character, Roosevelt attempted to inject western vigor into eastern politics. As his public prominence grew, he increasingly linked sport and physicality rhetorically to strong moral character, service to the nation, military preparedness, and world leadership. His political and social essays, as well as his private correspondences, often reflected on the role of physical vigor in the promotion of moral strength, and he ruminated about which endeavors were most suitable for this end. Only by preserving the vigorous, physical capacities of the American citizenry could the United States fulfill its destiny as a world leader. As TR put it toward the end of "The Strenuous Life," it was "only through strife, through hard and dangerous endeavor, that we shall ultimately win the goal of true national greatness."¹¹⁹

Despite the closing of the frontier in the late 19th century, Roosevelt's image of the rugged and robust statesman had great appeal, both in his own day and throughout the twentieth century. H.W. Brands argues that Roosevelt was the perfect fit for his time, because he arrived on the national scene during a period when "America had a particular weakness for romantic heroes."¹²⁰ But he remained a popular president long after he was gone, perhaps because of the perceived authenticity of his image. In biographies and edited compilations of his work, there seems to be little separation between Roosevelt, the life he led, and the "strenuous life" he advocated both for the citizenry and the nation itself. Roosevelt took to the "bully pulpit" at a time with the popular mass media—specifically, mass circulation magazines—were gaining in popularity, and Roosevelt smartly used the press to bolster his own image as daring and athletic. Whether staging athletic exhibitions at the White House or allowing reporters to accompany him on westward expeditions, Roosevelt not only utilized the media but cast the appropriate message himself in his prolific writings about the frontier experience, hunting and exploration, and natural history. For Americans who had little to no firsthand experience with such adventures, Roosevelt provided vicarious experiences and reflected on the lessons to be learned.

One reason why Roosevelt's character rhetoric resonated so strongly, as Leroy Dorsey has suggested, is that it so closely corresponded with the myth of the American Dream—the dream that all citizens have the means and opportunity for a successful and fulfilling life if they are just willing to work hard enough. It may seem strange that Roosevelt's vision of success is so closely tied to physicality, since not everyone is born with natural physical or athletic prowess. Yet by emphasizing his own success at

overcoming his childhood ailments, Roosevelt suggested that his vision of the strenuous life was, in fact, available to all. Roosevelt loved to point out that that he was not a gifted or natural athlete, as Donald Day has noted. But through hard work, persistence, and the right kind of training, he was able to overcome those limitations and not only pursue a career in politics and public service but also become an accomplished athlete and outdoorsman.¹²¹

According to Roosevelt, success in life was “open to a large number of persons, if only they seriously determine to achieve it.” Even the “average man of sound body and fair mind, who has no remarkable mental or physical attributes,” could achieve much by working hard and making the most “out of the aptitudes that he does possess.”¹²² Of course, the truth is that Roosevelt’s vision of character was both hypermasculine and elitist. For women, Roosevelt’s vision of good citizenship was rather limited, as evidenced in this brief passage from *Realizable Ideals*: “The first essential toward the achievement of good citizenship is, of course, the building up the kind of character . . . which will make the woman a good daughter when she is young, a good wife and mother as she grows older.”¹²³ Nor did Roosevelt acknowledge that his life of privilege played a big role in his ability to pursue his athletic interests and outdoor adventures. Undertaking any of the physical endeavors Roosevelt prescribed—from hunting to ranching to athletics—required not only money but leisure time, which were not luxuries most of Roosevelt’s fellow citizens enjoyed.

Whatever the limitations of TR’s vision of the strenuous life, subsequent presidents have attempted to both imitate Roosevelt’s heroic image and replicate and reinforce his association of physical strength and athletic prowess with democratic

citizenship. Roosevelt's image of physicality also inspired many imitators. John Sayle Watterson has argued that Roosevelt represented "a melding of sports and politics that has now become commonplace," and that his "life of active pursuits would raise athletic and outdoor sports to a level never before associated with the presidency."¹²⁴ In the next chapter, I look at how another U.S. president, John F. Kennedy, cultivated a similar *ethos* of physical vigor and used that *ethos* to constitute citizenship ideals and to promote a particular policy agenda.

Notes

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- ¹ Owen Wister, "Theodore Roosevelt: The Sportsman and the Man." *Outing*, June 1901, 242-48.
- ² David McCullough, *Mornings on Horseback* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1981), 211.
- ³ Paul Grondahl, *I Rose Like a Rocket: The Political Education of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 83.
- ⁴ John Milton Cooper, Jr. *The Warrior and the Priest: Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983), 7.
- ⁵ John Sayle Watterson, *The Games Presidents Play: Sports and the Presidency* (Baltimore, Md: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006): 38-39.
- ⁶ Theodore Roosevelt, "The Strenuous Life," in *The Strenuous Life: Essays and Addresses* (New York: The Century Co., 1902), 1.
- ⁷ Theodore Roosevelt, "The Strenuous Life," 2.
- ⁸ Theodore Roosevelt, "The Strenuous Life," 3.
- ⁹ Theodore Roosevelt, "The Strenuous Life" in *Theodore Roosevelt: An American Mind*, ed. Mario R. DiNunzio (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 184.
- ¹⁰ Theodore Roosevelt, "America's Part of the World's Work" in *Theodore Roosevelt: An American Mind*, ed. Mario R. DiNunzio (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 181.
- ¹¹ John M. Murphy, "The Heroic Tradition in Presidential Rhetoric," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 3 (2000): 468.
- ¹² J. Michael Hogan, "Introduction: Rhetoric and Reform in the Progressive Era," in Hogan (ed.), *Rhetoric and Reform in the Progressive Era* (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2003): xii.
- ¹³ Hogan, "Introduction: Rhetoric and Reform in the Progressive Era," x.
- ¹⁴ Hogan, "Introduction: Rhetoric and Reform in the Progressive Era," x.
- ¹⁵ Leroy G. Dorsey, "Preaching Morality in Modern America: Theodore Roosevelt's Rhetorical Progressivism," in Hogan (ed.), *Rhetoric and Reform in the Progressive Era*, 49-83.
- ¹⁶ Dorsey, "Preaching Morality in Modern America," 51.
- ¹⁷ Leroy G. Dorsey, *We Are All Americans, Pure and Simple: Theodore Roosevelt and the Myth of Americanism* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2007), 4-6.

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- ¹⁸ Hogan, "Introduction: Rhetoric and Reform in the Progressive Era," xiii.
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- ²⁰ H.W. Brands, *T.R.: The Last Romantic* (New York: BasicBooks, 1997), 9.
- ²¹ McCullough, *Mornings on Horseback*, 93.
- ²² McCullough, *Mornings on Horseback*, 36.
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- ²⁷ McCullough, *Mornings on Horseback*, 118.
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- ²⁹ Theodore Roosevelt, *Diaries of Boyhood and Youth* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928).
- ³⁰ McCullough, *Mornings on Horseback*, 167.
- ³¹ Kathleen Dalton, *Theodore Roosevelt: A Strenuous Life* (New York: Vintage, 2004), 63
- ³² Brands, *T.R.: The Last Romantic*, 68-69
- ³³ Brands, *T.R.: The Last Romantic*, 61-62.
- ³⁴ Brands, *T.R.: The Last Romantic*, 88-89
- ³⁵ Edmund Morris, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: Modern Library, 2001): 109
- ³⁶ Cooper, *The Warrior and the Priest*, 7.
- ³⁷ Edmund Morris, *Theodore Rex* (New York: Random House, 2001), 420
- ³⁸ Herman Hagedorn, *Roosevelt in the Bad Lands* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1921), 8.
- ³⁹ McCullough, *Mornings on Horseback*, 328-329.
- ⁴⁰ Donald Day, *The Hunting and Exploring Adventures of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: The Dial Press, 1955), 33.
- ⁴¹ Farida A. Wiley, *Theodore Roosevelt's America: Selections from the Writings of the Oyster Bay Naturalist* (New York: The Devin-Adair Company, 1955), 19.

⁴² Theodore Roosevelt, *Letters and Speeches* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1951), 20.

⁴³ Roosevelt wrote extensively about his Western experiences and adventures, extolling the virtues of ranch life. In the 1880s, the publishing market was saturated with accounts of frontier adventures, but Roosevelt got around that problem by purchasing an interest in G.P. Putnam's Sons. Later, anthropologist George Grinnell reviewed Roosevelt's book, *Natural History*, which led to a series of exchanges published in *Field and Stream*. Roosevelt also wrote a series of articles on "Ranch and Game Shooting in the West" for *Outing* magazine, the *Sports Illustrated* of its time. The features described Roosevelt's preparations for hunting excursions and cattle driving. His well-known volume, *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail*, first appeared as series of articles in *Century Magazine*. See Brands, *T.R.: The Last Romantic*, 188; Theodore Roosevelt, "Ranch Life and Game Shooting in the West." *Outing*, March 1886, 610-616; April 1886, 3-6; May 1886, 131-36; June 1886, 259-263; July 1886, 387-391; August 1886, 522-525; and McCullough, *Mornings on Horseback*, 340.

⁴⁴ Theodore Roosevelt, *Ranch Life and the Hunting-Trail* (New York: Winchester Press, 1969), 83.

⁴⁵ Roosevelt, *Ranch Life and the Hunting-Trail*, 6.

⁴⁶ Roosevelt, *Ranch Life and the Hunting-Trail*, 79

⁴⁷ Roosevelt, *Ranch Life and the Hunting-Trail*, 71.

⁴⁸ Roosevelt, *The Rough Riders*, 282.

⁴⁹ Roosevelt, *The Rough Riders*, 286.

⁵⁰ Watterson, *The Games Presidents Play*, 47

⁵¹ Dalton, *Theodore Roosevelt: A Strenuous Life*, 241. She suggests that courting westerners was an important strategic move after Roosevelt had alienated southern voters by inviting Booker T. Washington to the White House.

⁵² Roosevelt, *Outdoor Pastimes*, 377.

⁵³ Theodore Roosevelt, *African Game Trails: An Account of the African Wanderings of an American Hunter-Naturalist* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), 568-71.

⁵⁴ Roosevelt, *African Game Trails*, ix.

⁵⁵ Brands, *T.R.: The Last Romantic*, 655.

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- ⁵⁶ Mario R. DiNunzio, "Introduction," in *Theodore Roosevelt: An American Mind*, ed. Mario R. DiNunzio (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 225.
- ⁵⁷ Brands, *T.R.: The Last Romantic*, 739.
- ⁵⁸ Brands, *T.R.: The Last Romantic*, 740-741.
- ⁵⁹ Roosevelt, *Letters and Speeches*, 30-31.
- ⁶⁰ Roosevelt, *The Rough Riders*, 293.
- ⁶¹ Day, *The Hunting and Exploring Adventures of Theodore Roosevelt*, x.
- ⁶² Roosevelt, *Letters and Speeches*, 267-69.
- ⁶³ Day, *The Hunting and Exploring Adventures of Theodore Roosevelt*, x.
- ⁶⁴ Theodore Roosevelt, *A Bully Father: Theodore Roosevelt's Letters to His Children* (New York: Random House, 1995), 166.
- ⁶⁵ Roosevelt, *Letters and Speeches*, 448-449.
- ⁶⁶ Roosevelt, *The Adventures of Theodore Roosevelt*, ix.
- ⁶⁷ Dalton, *Theodore Roosevelt: A Strenuous Life*, 214.
- ⁶⁸ Roosevelt, *Letters and Speeches*, 267-69.
- ⁶⁹ Dalton, *Theodore Roosevelt: A Strenuous Life*, 39.
- ⁷⁰ Theodore Roosevelt, *American Ideals and Other Essays Social and Political* (New York: AMS Press, 1969), 336.
- ⁷¹ Benjamin G. Rader, "The Quest for Self-Sufficiency and the New Strenuousness: Reflections on the Strenuous Life of the 1970s and 1980s," *Journal of Sport History* 18 (Summer 1991): 255-266.
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- ⁷⁴ Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge., *Hero Tales from American History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906).
- ⁷⁵ Roosevelt, *Colonial Policies*, 37.
- ⁷⁶ Roosevelt, *Outdoor Pastimes*, 394-95.
- ⁷⁷ Roosevelt, "Washington's Forgotten Maxim," 174-175.

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- ⁷⁸ Hermann Hagedorn, *Theodore Roosevelt's The Free Citizen: A Summons to Service of the American Ideal* (New York: The Theodore Roosevelt Association, 1958), 4-5.
- ⁷⁹ Roosevelt, *The Great Adventure*, 5.
- ⁸⁰ DiNunzio, *Theodore Roosevelt: An American Mind*, 174.
- ⁸¹ Theodore Roosevelt, *National Strength and International Duty* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1917), 95.
- ⁸² Roosevelt, "Washington's Forgotten Maxim," 174.
- ⁸³ Roosevelt, *The Great Adventure*, 4.
- ⁸⁴ Roosevelt, *The Rough Riders*, 300-301.
- ⁸⁵ Hagedorn, *The Free Citizen*, 48-49.
- ⁸⁶ Roosevelt, *The Rough Riders*, 303.
- ⁸⁷ Hagedorn, *The Free Citizen*, 5-6.
- ⁸⁸ Roosevelt, *American Ideals*, 3.
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- ⁹¹ Theodore Roosevelt, *Realizable Ideals: Earl Lectures of Pacific Theological Seminary Delivered in Berkeley, California, in 1911* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1911), 55.
- ⁹² Roosevelt, *American Ideals*, 43.
- ⁹³ Roosevelt, *The Great Adventure*, 25.
- ⁹⁴ Roosevelt, *The Rough Riders*, 304.
- ⁹⁵ Roosevelt, *American Ideals*, v.
- ⁹⁶ Roosevelt, *American Ideals*, 42.
- ⁹⁷ Roosevelt, *Realizable Ideals*, 39-42.
- ⁹⁸ Roosevelt, *American Ideals*, 42.
- ⁹⁹ Roosevelt, *Outdoor Pastimes*, 394-95.
- ¹⁰⁰ Roosevelt, *The Rough Riders*, 294.
- ¹⁰¹ Day, *The Hunting and Exploring Adventures of Theodore Roosevelt*, xv.

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- ¹⁰³ Roosevelt, *Outdoor Pastimes*, 394-95.
- ¹⁰⁴ Roosevelt, *The Rough Riders*, 298.
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- ¹⁰⁶ McCullough, *Mornings on Horseback*, 197
- ¹⁰⁷ Roosevelt, *The Rough Riders*, 293.
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- ¹¹⁰ Roosevelt, *The Rough Riders*, 296.
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- ¹¹³ Roosevelt, *Letters and Speeches*, 114-15.
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- ¹¹⁵ Watterson, *The Games Presidents Play*, 54-55.
- ¹¹⁶ Day, *The Hunting and Exploring Adventures of Theodore Roosevelt*, xv.
- ¹¹⁷ Roosevelt, "The Strenuous Life," 3.
- ¹¹⁸ Roosevelt, "The Strenuous Life," 3.
- ¹¹⁹ Theodore Roosevelt, "The Strenuous Life," 21
- ¹²⁰ Brands, *T.R.: The Last Romantic*, 812.
- ¹²¹ Day, *The Hunting and Exploring Adventures of Theodore Roosevelt*, xvi.
- ¹²² Roosevelt, *The Rough Riders*, 306.
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Chapter Two: The Rhetoric of Vigor: John F. Kennedy and the President's Council on Physical Fitness

In many ways, John F. Kennedy could be considered a successor to Theodore Roosevelt, a “student” of TR’s leadership legacy. As two of the youngest presidents, Roosevelt and Kennedy were both Harvard-educated men who grew up immersed in athletic culture. Both presidents used their vitality to compensate for physical weaknesses. Choosing boxing as his first sport, Roosevelt later cultivated a reputation as an avid outdoorsman and hunter, although he also learned the art of self-defense and dabbled in the fashionable blue-blood sport of tennis.¹ Kennedy was a more natural athlete, but he frequently had to battle illness to compete in his favorite pastimes: football, swimming, and golf.² Both war heroes as well, Roosevelt and Kennedy harnessed their youthful energy to campaign for the presidency, delivering speeches and writing for the popular press about the importance of physical fitness to the strength of the nation. As president, Kennedy even invoked Roosevelt speech, “The Strenuous Life,” in an address to the delegates of his Youth Fitness Conference in 1961, reminding them that “our country calls not for the life of ease, but for the life of strenuous endeavor.”³ Rhetorical scholar John Murphy has identified Kennedy and Roosevelt as exemplars of the “heroic tradition” of presidential rhetoric, a tradition in which character and nation merge as the speaker situates himself as the embodiment of the kind of nation he envisions. The heroic president is one who “challenged citizens with his words and with highly publicized, rhetorically framed deeds.”⁴ Through a rhetoric emphasizing the

nation's prosperity, power, restlessness, and boisterousness, heroic presidents amplify the nation while also emphasizing its unfinished state.⁵

Sixty years after Roosevelt preached the doctrine of the strenuous life, Kennedy also took to the bully pulpit to echo Roosevelt's call for a more physically fit and vigorous nation. In a 1962 article in *Sports Illustrated*, "The Vigor We Need," Kennedy summoned his inner Roosevelt to articulate his conception of national character as the "physical hardihood that helped Americans in two great world wars to defeat strong and tenacious foes and make this country history's mightiest defender of freedom."⁶ Like Roosevelt, Kennedy incorporated sport into his broader political philosophy by discursively binding sport to national character and strength, as well as to his concept of the ideal citizen. Like Roosevelt, Kennedy also sought to embody the philosophy he advocated by staging highly publicized media events demonstrating his own love of sports and physicality, engaging in golf, sailing outings, and touch football games on the White House lawn—all while appearing youthful, tanned, and relaxed.

During both his campaign and his presidency, Kennedy capitalized on his youthful, vigorous image to define his leadership and set the tone for his administration's policy agenda. Sport historian John Sayle Watterson argued that Kennedy often had to "feign" this vigorous image to hide his health problems, which included Addison's disease and chronic back problems. Nevertheless, he "ushered in the age of presidential sports," setting precedents that later presidents followed.⁷ Kennedy also attempted to institutionalize his vision of a hearty and vital citizenry, particularly his crusade to improve the physical fitness of American children. Asserting "a close relationship between physical fitness and intellectual vigor and moral strength,"⁸ Kennedy established

the President's Council on Physical Fitness in 1963, which aimed to encourage young people to get involved in physical education and sports. Subsequently, he promoted "the vigor we need" in a number of major addresses and essays in the popular press.

Kennedy hoped to establish a mandate for fitness that permanently institutionalized physical education and sport as a priority of the executive branch. Using a Cold War rhetoric of crisis to contextualize his call for fitness, his rhetoric of vigor became an important part of his broader approach to Cold War foreign policy. Sara Ann Mehlretter has depicted Kennedy's well known and inspirational inaugural address as a polarizing discourse that escalated Cold War tensions and demanded commitment and sacrifice from American citizens in the defense of freedom around the globe.⁹ Steven R. Goldzwig and George N. Dionisopoulos likewise have described Kennedy's foreign policy discourse as "nationalistic, jingoistic, and at times xenophobic."¹⁰ With respect to the Cuban Missile Crisis in particular, Denise M. Botsdorff has argued that Kennedy employed a "rhetoric of deflection" that "placed the burden of responsibility for the crisis, as well as for its resolution, on the shoulders of the Soviet Union."¹¹ Yet in calling on Americans to "reactivate their citizenship,"¹² Kennedy also put part of the responsibility for the Cold War on the American people themselves. If America hoped to prevail in what he described as the "long twilight struggle" against the forces of totalitarianism, Americans would need to recapture the drive, determination, and physical strength that historically had made the nation great.¹³

In his public statements about the importance of physical fitness, Kennedy borrowed a page from Teddy Roosevelt by linking athletics to national character and the ideals of citizenship. He also echoed Roosevelt in connecting physical fitness to military

preparedness and national security. Defending the efforts of his administration to implement policies promoting fitness, Kennedy cited evidence of their positive effects. Ultimately, however, Kennedy, like Roosevelt, placed the responsibility for cultivating national vigor on the individual citizen, not the federal government. In Kennedy's rhetoric, America's fitness program differed from that of Soviet Union in that Americans had a choice. While the Soviets forced many of their citizens into national service and became famous during this period for the subsidies they paid to Olympic athletes, America remained committed to the values of amateur athletics and promoted an approach to sports and physical fitness compatible with the democratic way of life.

I begin this chapter by reviewing the ways in which sport functioned as an important propaganda device during the Cold War. I then discuss the 1955 report on the fitness of American youth, and how this report provided an impetus for Kennedy to create a rhetorical crisis about the nation's physical strength—a crisis which he attempted to address through establishing a Council on Physical Fitness and advocating for the adoption of the Council's programs. I then turn to an analysis of Kennedy's rhetoric in support of improving youth fitness through his administration's policies, illuminating how Kennedy framed the importance of physical fitness within the context of the Cold War and made fitness and physical vigor central to his conception of the ideal citizen.

A New Field of Combat: Sport and the Cold War

Sport functioned as a powerful symbolic vehicle for working through Cold War tensions, sometimes even seeming to substitute for military conflict. In his dissertation on sport in Cold War America, Thomas Domer argued that the Eisenhower and Kennedy

administrations raised sports consciousness to new levels during the Cold War. Both leaders recognized sport as a potent tool of national policy and a propaganda medium through which the nation could demonstrate its superiority. In the process, sport was transformed from an individual or even team endeavor to a bureaucratized and institutionalized device for mobilizing foreign and domestic opinion. The Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations began exploring opportunities for supporting American athletes and promoting the American sporting image without resorting to direct subsidies.¹⁴ Kennedy in particular made physical education and sport an important element of his administration's Cold War agenda by establishing a White House Committee on Health and Fitness, an annual National Youth Fitness Congress, and the President's Council on Physical Fitness. He also issued directives for improving the physical condition of Armed Forces personnel, considered government subsidies for U.S. Olympic teams, increased appropriations to allow armed services personnel to participate in the Olympics, and enhanced State Department sponsorship of cultural and athletic exchange. Although Kennedy stopped short of directly subsidizing amateur athletes (a practice the Soviet Union had begun), all of these initiatives functioned to promote amateur sports.¹⁵

Throughout the Cold War, each president established some kind of sporting policy agenda. The Johnson administration continued Kennedy's emphasis on physical fitness as a means to counter the Soviet challenge. Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford shifted the focus to reforming America's policies on amateur athletics with the goal of improving America's standing at international sports competitions. Initiated by the Nixon administration and established by the Ford administration, the President's Commission

on Olympic Sports sought to adjudicate disputes between the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). The Commission also explored ways to support Olympic athletes without paying them directly, such as providing top-quality facilities and trainers.¹⁶

Sport historian Kurt Edward Kemper has contended that, during the Cold War, Americans looked to sports as a social institution that “reinforced their sense of national identity and held at bay their nagging insecurities.”¹⁷ Kemper examined how college football functioned in such a capacity, but the Cold War Olympic Games most vividly captured the attention of the nation as a battle of ideologies. Despite the insistence of the long-standing International Olympic Committee president, American Avery Brundage, that the Olympic Games should only be “contests between individuals and teams” (he even proposed that the Olympics stop using national flags and anthems), the global community interpreted the medal races as contests for national superiority. This was particularly true when the games pitted against each other the world’s two superpowers, the United States and Soviet Union.¹⁸

As the Soviet Union began to enjoy more success at the Olympic Games in the 1950s, U.S. fears about the nation falling behind the Soviets in physical fitness began to escalate. In August 1957, *Sports Illustrated* published a twenty-four page report evaluating school fitness programs in the forty-eight states. The report concluded that despite increased interest and awareness, educators had taken little action to improve fitness.¹⁹ *Sports Illustrated* followed up with a sixteen-page cover story in December 1957, exposing the Soviet Union’s success at disseminating propaganda extolling the physical fitness of its own athletes and citizens. Author Jerry Cooke recalled observing

factory and office workers beginning their day by doing gymnastics, while children learned their first exercises in nursery school. Cooke described the scene as “an entirely new” Soviet Union, one saturated with sports activities “directed single-mindedly at improving his own physical fitness and his sporting prowess, and thereby that of the entire Soviet Union.”²⁰ In assessing the impact of these *Sports Illustrated* reports upon the national climate, sociologist Jeffrey Montez de Oca coined the term “muscle gap” to describe the perceived crisis, which he defined as “a period of Cold War anxiety projected onto the bodies of young, white males that produced a discourse fixated on their perceived softness and openness to communist penetration.” The federal government’s new emphasis on physical education, as Montez de Oca notes, was a response to this perceived crisis, a way to prepare young males to serve their country during the Cold War.²¹ The most critical component of this new strategy was the President’s Council on Physical Fitness.

Responding to the “Crisis”: The President’s Council on Physical Fitness

In 1955, Dr. Hans Kraus, Associate Professor of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation at New York University, and Ruth (Bonnie) Prudden, Director of the Institute for Physical Fitness in White Plains, New York, issued a shocking report. The two researchers found that American youth, hailed as the future leaders of the free world, were remarkably unfit.²² Based on the Kraus-Weber Tests for Muscular Fitness, the report found that 57.9% of American children failed one or more of six tests for muscular strength and flexibility, while only 8.7 % of their European counterparts failed. In the flexibility test, 44.3 % of American youngsters failed while only 7.8% of the European

children failed. Moreover, 35.7% of American youth failed one or more of the five strength tests administered, while only 1.1% of the European youngsters failed. In Austria and Switzerland, the rate of failure was only 0.5%.²³

President Dwight D. Eisenhower initially responded to the report with grave concern, appointing the President's Council on Youth Fitness.²⁴ He directed the Council to conduct its own testing, which ultimately concluded that more than one-fourth of American schoolchildren were unable to demonstrate minimum levels of physical fitness. Half were unable to meet comprehensive tests of physical strength and skills.²⁵ In 1957, *Sports Illustrated* published its own survey on youth fitness programs in a 24-page report that seemed to conclude that President Eisenhower's response amounted to "more words than deeds," and that "concrete proposals" were not being "taken seriously" by the president and his administration.²⁶ A few months later, a photo editorial by Jerry Cooke appeared in *Sports Illustrated*, showing how much more seriously the Soviets took physical fitness. Cooke's commentary on the photos described a "day-by-day barrage of propaganda extolling the advantages of physical fitness, plus an almost deliberate, certainly conscious, withdrawal by the average citizen from the complex problems of politics and economics in the Soviet Union." The result was a "sports and physical fitness boom" in the Soviet Union, which was "unparalleled anywhere in the world today." Cooke concluded that the typical Soviet citizen clearly understood the importance of sports and physical fitness, and was "directed single-mindedly at improving his own physical fitness and his sporting prowess, and thereby that of the entire Soviet Union."²⁷ The clear implication of these two articles was that Americans were not only lagging behind the Soviets in their own individual fitness, but that the

nation was falling behind the Soviets in cultivating the strong, dedicated, and disciplined citizenry necessary to win the Cold War.

When Kennedy took office in 1961, he recognized an opportunity to showcase his leadership by addressing the alleged “muscle gap” between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. He immediately identified physical fitness as a national priority and dramatically expanded the campaign to improve the nation’s fitness programs. He reconstituted the Council on Youth Fitness as the President’s Council on Physical Fitness, and he named as its head Charles “Bud” Wilkinson, legendary Oklahoma football coach. He sent Wilkinson to address a group of youth campers to promote fitness as being important to national health.²⁸ Kennedy oversaw the development of publications designed to develop physical fitness programs in schools and communities.²⁹ He also arranged partnerships between government and private industry, such as the deal to produce a \$100,000 film promoting youth fitness sponsored by the President’s Council on Physical Fitness and the Equitable Life Assurance Society.³⁰

Most significantly, Kennedy reached out directly to the American people through several articles in *Sports Illustrated* extolling the virtues of physical fitness. He also delivered a series of speeches and statements on the importance of sports and physical fitness to the nation’s Cold War struggle against the Soviets. In doing so, Kennedy rhetorically created something of a “crisis” surrounding the nation’s physical condition and initiated an ongoing dialogue about the causes and dangers of “the soft American.” In an increasingly tense global climate, physical fitness and sports thus became caught up in the larger battle between democracy and communism.

A More Vigorous Nation: Democracy and the Encouragement of Physical Fitness

In his brief tenure as president, Kennedy specifically addressed physical fitness and sports no less than twenty times in his public statements.³¹ On six occasions, he delivered major policy addresses about his administration's efforts to bolster the nation's physical fitness. These six speeches, along with two articles Kennedy authored for *Sports Illustrated*, provide insight into how Kennedy hoped to persuade the American public to embrace his mandate for physical fitness. As part of that mandate, Kennedy hoped to permanently institutionalize physical fitness and sports as part of the executive branch's responsibilities—as part of the president's duties as the chief representative of *all* of the people, perhaps even as one of his duties as Commander-in-Chief. Connecting the issue to the global struggle between democracy and communism, Kennedy interpreted the challenge of physical fitness within the context of the Cold War and made fitness and physical vigor central to his conception of the ideal citizen.

In his public discussions of the importance of physical fitness, Kennedy emphasized several key themes. First, he connected athletics with individual and national character development. Secondly, he equated strong physical fitness with military preparedness and national security—a critical issue of public concern during the Cold War era. Third, he discussed the administration's policies on physical fitness and sports and cited evidence of their success. Finally, he underscored that the responsibility for cultivating national vigor ultimately rested with the individual citizen. In developing these themes, Kennedy distinguished his efforts from those of the Eisenhower administration. He also differentiated the American approach to physical fitness from the

Soviet Union's programs, which presumably reflected their communist values. Depicting the American approach as one rooted in democratic values, he contrasted American support for programs that encouraged athletic achievement with Soviet policies that presumably violated the spirit of amateur athletics and demanded compulsory participation.

Even before taking office, Kennedy demonstrated his commitment to physical fitness and identified the issue as a major policy objective of his incoming administration. As president-elect, Kennedy authored an article in *Sports Illustrated*, "The Soft American," that echoed Roosevelt's argument that strong nations are characterized by the physical fitness of their people. To support his contention, Kennedy went back in history, calling the ancient Greek civilization the first that "prized physical excellence and athletic skills among man's great goals and among the prime foundations of a vigorous state." He credited the ancient Greeks with producing not only great intellectual and philosophical works, but also with cultivating "a belief in the importance of physical soundness which has become a part of Western tradition." Taking the historical argument even further, Kennedy implicitly cast the United States in the role of the democratic Athenians, while the Soviets seemed to represent the warlike Spartans and their corruption of athletics. He specifically cautioned that Americans "do not, like the ancient Spartans, wish to train the bodies of our youths merely to make them more effective warriors."³²

Kennedy expressed concern that the current generation of Americans might have lost this appreciation for the importance of society's physical well-being, declaring that "softness on the part of individual citizens can help to strip and destroy the vitality of a

nation.” As evidence of such a decline, he cited figures showing that almost one out of every two young Americans who attempted to enlist for service in the Korean War was being rejected by Selective Service as “mentally, morally or physically unfit.”³³ He attributed the nation’s past success in other armed conflict to the stamina and vigor of American soldiers, whose bodies had been “conditioned by a lifetime of participation in sports and interest in physical activity.” Kennedy thus directly correlated military success with physical fitness and athleticism, concluding: “Our struggles against aggressors throughout our history have been won on the playgrounds and corner lots and fields of America.”³⁴

Exploiting Cold War sensitivities, Kennedy depicted declining physical fitness as a “menace to our security,” especially given the commitment to national fitness demonstrated by the Soviets. Portraying the Soviets as a “powerful and implacable adversary determined to show the world that only the Communist system possesses the vigor and determination necessary to satisfy awakening aspirations for progress and the elimination of poverty and want,” Kennedy implored Americans to meet the challenge of the “enemy” through physical fitness.³⁵ He argued that citizens’ physical condition “is one of America’s most precious resources,” further suggesting: “If we waste and neglect this resource, if we allow it to dwindle and grow soft then we will destroy much of our ability to meet the great and vital challenges which confront our people. We will be unable to realize our full potential as a nation.”³⁶

Although Kennedy declared that “the promotion of sports participation and physical fitness” to be a “basic and continuing policy of the United States,” he also distinguished between the American and the Soviet approach to promoting physical

fitness. Kennedy characterized the American government as serving only a leadership function, aimed at “keeping physical fitness in the forefront of the nation’s concerns” in order to “make a substantial contribution toward improving the health and vigor of our citizens.” Kennedy made clear that each individual citizen was still ultimately responsible for choosing whether or not to prioritize fitness. He reminded Americans: “We do not live in a regimented society where men are forced to live their lives in the interest of the state. We are, all of us, as free to direct the activities of our bodies as we are to pursue the objects of our thought.” Kennedy concluded by urging citizens to renew their commitment to a life of physical vigor in order to preserve this very sort of personal freedom.³⁷

Kennedy’s next opportunity to express these ideas came on February 21, 1961, when he delivered remarks to the delegates attending the first annual Youth Fitness Conference, held in the Health, Education, and Welfare Auditorium in Washington, D.C., and attended by the officials Kennedy appointed to the Council on Youth Fitness (later renamed the President’s Council on Physical Fitness). Once again, Kennedy began by invoking the idea that national strength was closely correlated with physical fitness. He recalled Teddy Roosevelt’s efforts to promote the physical fitness of America’s armed services, as well as the ancient Greek tradition of extolling both strong minds and strong bodies. He charged the delegates with ensuring that “we don’t lose this very valuable facet of our national character: physical vitality, which is tied into qualities of character, which is tied into qualities of intellectual vigor and vitality.” Kennedy then suggested that such intellectual vigor would inspire more young people to serve the nation through initiatives such as the Peace Corps, a program that challenged college graduates to live

and work in developing countries around the world in order to encourage mutual understanding between Americans and other cultures.³⁸

In his remarks at the Youth Fitness Conference, Kennedy addressed once again the federal government's role in improving physical fitness. He argued that the government could not mandate physical fitness but could use its "influence" and "prestige" to draw attention to the matter. Imagining "a program which will inspire our country to be concerned," Kennedy portrayed the government—and presumably, the president himself—as the catalyst for a reawakening of the public to the importance of physical fitness. Again, the federal government could not require or compel the public to become more fit, as presumably the Soviets were doing. Rather, fitness would be "really a matter which starts with each individual family."³⁹

A few months later, the president delivered another speech on sports and physical fitness, "Remarks on the Youth Fitness Program."⁴⁰ This speech, delivered in a White House press conference on July 19, 1961, again challenged each and every citizen to take up the cause of improving the nation's physical fitness. Kennedy opened by assuring Americans that "(t)he vigor of our country, its physical vigor and energy, is going to be no more advanced, no more substantial, than the vitality and will of our countrymen." Placing the burden squarely upon parents, schools, and communities, Kennedy argued that improving physical fitness would require a concerted and unified effort on the part of every American. The president explained that national vigor ultimately depended upon the "physical fitness" of every individual citizen—on "their willingness to participate in physical exercise," and "their willingness to participate in physical contests, in athletic contests." If all Americans rallied behind his administration's efforts to promote fitness,

Kennedy concluded, they could “do a good deal to strengthen this country, and also to contribute to a greater enjoyment of life in the years to come.”⁴¹

Despite his individualistic rhetoric, Kennedy also outlined in this speech three specific recommendations that his Council on Youth Fitness had developed for the public schools. First, the schools were urged “to identify the physically underdeveloped pupil” and to work with that pupil “to improve his physical capacity.” If the student and school would “work together” on fitness,” Kennedy assured his listeners, “a great deal can be done.” Second, the Council recommended “a minimum of 15 minutes of vigorous activity every day for all of our school students,” and this included “boys and girls alike.” Finally, schools were urged to use “valid fitness tests” to determine the “physical abilities” of each student and to “evaluate their progress.”⁴²

Kennedy concluded his remarks to the press by expressing his hope that his administration’s fitness initiatives would contribute to “the long-range happiness and well-being of all of you,” while also strengthening the country by encouraging “a more active and vigorous life” for all of its citizens. He urged all of his listeners, “as individuals and as groups,” to join in his efforts to strengthen “the physical well-being of young American boys and girls,” and the administration followed up on the speech by distributing a pamphlet from the Council on Youth Fitness, entitled “Youth Physical Fitness—Suggested Elements of a School-Centered Program.”⁴³ Although Kennedy stopped short of suggesting that schools should be legally required to adopt the Council’s recommendations, he made clear that his administration considered it a matter of utmost importance—even a national security concern. That theme would become even more

prominent in the days to come, particularly as the Cold War heated up in the wake of the Bay of Pigs incident of April 1961 and the closing of the Berlin border in August.

In September of 1961, Kennedy issued a “Statement by the President on the Physical Fitness of Young Americans.” In this statement, released by the president while visiting Hyannis and distributed to the press, Kennedy emphasized the importance of the nation’s physical fitness to its military preparedness. With Cold War tensions approaching a fever pitch, the president made the case that the nation’s physical “softness” posed a real danger, even in the age of atomic weapons. Kennedy supported his point by disclosing that General Lewis B. Hershey, Director of the Selective Service System, had recently reported that one million of the six million men examined for military duty since October 1948 had been rejected for physical reasons. Unlike previous generations, Kennedy explained that “a very substantial number of these physically-unacceptable men were in the preventable category,” meaning that they were deficient in basic physical fitness. Kennedy went on to report that in just the previous year, 1960, the number of men with “preventable” physical deficiencies had reached an all-time high, with more than a thousand prospective enlistees per month being rejected for service.⁴⁴

Kennedy insisted that declining physical fitness had placed the U.S. military at a distinct disadvantage. The problem was already preventing the military from carrying out its objectives in the war against communism. He lamented that “[t]he number of these men in the preventable category—men who would not have been rejected had they participated in adequate physical developmental programs—represents more soldiers than we now have stationed in Berlin and West Germany ready to defend freedom.” Playing on national security fears, Kennedy closed by suggesting that the problem had reached

crisis proportions and by urging schools to immediately implement the recommendations of his Council on Youth Fitness.⁴⁵

In December of 1961, Kennedy used his honorary induction into the National Football Foundation and Hall of Fame to once again stump for his physical fitness agenda. At a banquet at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York City, the president began by praising several of his sporting heroes, allowing him to once again forge a link between athletic success and national character.⁴⁶ The president began by reminiscing about his favorite football memories, such as seeing University of Michigan Heisman Trophy-winner Tom Harmon score twenty-one points in the first half of a game against California on Kennedy's twenty-first birthday. He remarked: "I have seen so many men who participated in this sport—some celebrated and some obscure—who did demonstrate that the seeds had been well sown." After humbly referencing his role on the junior varsity football team at Harvard, he also commented: "I do see a close relationship between sports and our national life and I sometimes wonder whether those of us who love sports have done as much as we should in maintaining sports as a constructive part of this country's existence."⁴⁷

Kennedy then credited his youthful sporting endeavors with inspiring him to serve his country in the armed services and, later, in political office. He lamented that today's youth lacked that same inspiration because the focus of athletics had shifted from participation to "spectation." Consequently, he explained, most citizens now got their exercise "from climbing up to seats in stadiums, or from walking across the room to turn on our television sets."⁴⁸

The president worried that this transition from participatory sports to spectatorship also contributed to the problem of military recruitment. Repeating figures from his statement on youth fitness released in Hyannis about the numbers of men rejected for military duty, Kennedy added a few more statistics to even more vividly convey the extent of the crisis: “To get two men today, the United States Army must call seven men. Of the five rejected, three are turned down for physical reasons and two for mental disabilities. To get the 196 thousand additional men that we needed for Berlin, the government had to call up, therefore, 750 thousand men—and the rejection rate is increasing each year.”⁴⁹ After painting a dire picture of the problem, Kennedy proffered a solution: “the remedy, in my judgment, lies in one direction; that is, in developing programs for broad participation in exercise by all of our young men and women—all of our boys and girls.”⁵⁰

In addition to arguing for participatory sports, Kennedy used his Hall of Fame induction speech as a platform for advocating more support for America’s Olympic development program. He was careful to explain that such a program would not directly subsidize athletes, like the Olympic programs of the Soviet Union or China. Instead, Kennedy suggested that the U.S. should simply encourage excellence by cultivating a culture of sport and physical fitness throughout the nation. This the country could do by emphasizing “this most important part of life,” and by giving all Americans “the opportunity to exercise” and “to participate in physical activity.” In other words, the U.S. would succeed not by hiring professional athletes to compete in the Olympics, but by establishing “a standard of excellence for our country which will enable our athletes to win the Olympics—but more importantly than that, which will give us a nation of

vigorous men and women.”⁵¹ For the U.S., it was not about winning for propaganda purposes, but about recapturing the original purpose of the Olympics: encouraging amateur athletics, good citizenship, and international understanding through sports.

By the time of his National Football Hall of Fame speech, a year had passed since Kennedy first called for a new emphasis on physical fitness in his *Sports Illustrated* article, “The Soft American.” Although the president was still lobbying for some of his fitness programs, he could now cite at least some evidence of their effectiveness. In his Hall of Fame speech, he told the story of how Muskogee, Oklahoma, a city that had produced seven All-American athletes, was shocked to discover that 47 percent of its students could not pass a basic physical fitness test. After six weeks of following the administration’s recommendation that every student participate in fifteen-minutes of vigorous exercise daily, Muskogee experienced a 24 percent improvement rate in the test.⁵²

Kennedy concluded his Hall of Fame address by again urging the United States to follow the example of the ancient Greeks by cultivating both “mind and body” in “harmonious proportion.” American’s founders were committed to that ideal, and Kennedy even quoted Thomas Jefferson on the importance of fitness: “Not less than two hours a day should be devoted to exercise.” Kennedy concluded by suggesting that, in light of Jefferson’s statement, his proposals were modest indeed: “If a man who wrote the Declaration of Independence, was Secretary of State, and twice President could give it 2 hours, our children can give it 10 or 15 minutes.”⁵³

In July of 1962, Kennedy received the results of a report by the Council on Youth Fitness. In a statement reflecting on the findings, issued to the press from the White

House along with the Council's seven-page report, Kennedy again emphasized the responsibility of the public schools to help improve the physical fitness of the nation's youth. The results of the report had not been encouraging. The Council on Youth Fitness had found that one-fourth of the nation's 40 million school children could not pass a simple screening test for physical performance. Kennedy reiterated the significance of these findings by stating flatly: "This test is not difficult. It calls for only minimum acceptable levels of strength, flexibility and agility." He also reported that the Council's more comprehensive tests, which measured a broader range of physical achievement, found that almost half of American children could not attain passing levels.⁵⁴

At the same time, Kennedy expressed optimism that his efforts to make physical fitness a national priority were already yielding dividends. He explained that in schools with no physical fitness program, the screening tests had produced a 46 percent failure rate, while only 25 percent failed in those schools that had a physical education program. Moreover, once such programs were started, the rate of failure dropped dramatically, with the failure rate reduced to 11 percent in schools with no previous programs and only 5 percent in schools with existing programs. Kennedy used these findings as evidence that school-based physical education programs worked. He concluded his remarks by once again urging school administrators, teachers, school boards, and parents to implement programs "that contribute to the health and well-being of all our girls and boys."⁵⁵

In July of 1962, Kennedy published his second major article in *Sports Illustrated*, "The Vigor We Need." Kennedy began the piece by quoting British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli saying that "[t]he health of the people is really the foundation upon

which all their happiness and all their powers as a State depend.”⁵⁶ He then recalled the physical fortitude of the nation’s history, arguing: “It was men who possessed vigor and strength as well as courage and vision who first settled these shores and, over more than three centuries, subdued a continent and wrested a civilization from the wilderness. It was physical hardihood that helped Americans in two great world wars to defeat strong and tenacious foes and make this country history's mightiest defender of freedom.”⁵⁷

However, Kennedy then cautioned that “we must not allow our pride in these few men to obscure the fact that over the past decades the level of physical fitness of much of our citizenry has been far below any reasonable national standard.” Kennedy attributed this decline to the “paradoxical” results of economic, scientific, and technological progress, noting that while our nation’s progress had been “the result of our national vigor,” those same achievements “have also contributed to the draining of that vigor.”⁵⁸

Kennedy then turned to his administration’s efforts to encourage physical fitness programs in the schools. Reiterating that unlike Communist regimes, his administration would not legislate action or make participation compulsory, he again stressed the responsibilities of with individual citizen: “In the final analysis, it is this liberation of the individual to pursue his own ends, subject only to the loose restraints of a free society, which is the ultimate meaning of our civilization.” Kennedy pledged continued federal support for programs to create a more vigorous nation, but he made it “absolutely clear that the ultimate responsibility for the fitness of the American people” rested upon the “cooperation and determination of school boards and town officials, on thousands of community leaders, and on millions of fathers and mothers.”⁵⁹ In short, the federal government could encourage but not force the nation to become fit.

Kennedy would wait another year before again addressing the nation about the issue of sports and physical fitness. The passage of time allowed the president to gather more data on the results of his efforts to improve the fitness of the country. On August 13, 1963, Kennedy finally issued a “Progress Report by the President on Physical Fitness,” which was reprinted in *Look* magazine. Revisiting many of the same themes of his earlier statements, the statement also provided new data on the effects of his fitness initiatives. As usual, he began with historical recollections of the great civilizations (the Roman Empire, Renaissance Italy, and Elizabethan England) and how their achievements were rooted in a spirit of national vigor. He also recalled examples of American achievements that depended on physical vitality, ranging from “the astronaut exploring the boundaries of space” to the “overworked civil servant laboring into the night to keep a Government program going.” As usual, the president also underscored the relationship between athleticism and military preparedness, arguing that “the capacity of our Army to withstand aggression will depend in the future, as always, on the hardihood and endurance, the physical fitness, of the American GI.”⁶⁰ But the real purpose of Kennedy’s last statement on the issue was to boast about the progress that had been made and to celebrate how the U.S. had achieved those results.

Kennedy marshaled a variety of statistics and examples to demonstrate the success of the nationwide, school-based approach to physical education that his administration had championed. He reported that thirty-two states had implemented their own state fitness councils, and that in only a year’s time thirteen of those states had also strengthened their physical-education requirements. Additionally, he reported that twenty-one states had begun offering special summer programs to promote physical

fitness, and that more than half of these programs had been started during his term in office. Kennedy also noted that the number of schools conducting fitness programs had increased by 20 percent since the 1961-62 school-year. Nine states had implemented a daily physical education program for all elementary-level schoolchildren. The president was careful to point out that, under his tenure, the number of secondary schools testing for physical fitness jumped from less than 50 percent to 96 percent. To accentuate his claim that improving physical fitness required community cooperation, Kennedy also praised programs developed by private groups, including 4-H Clubs, the YMCA, and the American Medical Association.⁶¹

The result of all these efforts, according to Kennedy, was positive gains in fitness across all ages of youth. Kennedy explained that in the first set of fitness tests conducted by the Council on Youth Fitness, only 53 percent of the students could pass a minimum achievement test. But by 1963, 79 percent could pass an identical test. Moreover, while only 10 percent of children could pass more comprehensive fitness tests in 1961, but 1963 that number had risen to 21 percent. At the university level, Kennedy reported similar improvements. A Yale Physical Fitness test showed that the number of students passing increased from 34 percent in 1960 to 43 percent in 1961. During the same time period, the Physical Fitness Index at Springfield College rose from “subnormal” to “above normal.”⁶²

Although these results were not consistent across the nation, Kennedy nevertheless claimed success for his approach to promoting physical fitness through school-based programs. The president reiterated that “[w]e have never viewed the Council [on Physical Fitness] as a national department of physical education.” Instead,

the Council was designed to act merely as a “catalyst” or a “stimulus” to encouraging schools, communities, and individuals to meet their responsibility to maintain the vitality and fitness of America’s youth. In contrast to the Soviet Union, Kennedy reminded readers of the report that “fitness is not something that can be imposed by a government or by laws. It will not be produced by coercion or exhortation from above. It depends upon the will and the energy of those thousands of local and private groups that make up the fabric of our society. And it depends, preeminently, on the individual.”⁶³ For Kennedy, as for Teddy Roosevelt, fitness was an important national priority, but it was ultimately a personal responsibility. If the nation was to be fit and achieve great things, every American would have to view fitness as part of the responsibilities as citizens. The Communists might force their citizens to meet certain fitness standards, but that was not the American way.

Conclusion

During the tragically short yet eventful presidency of John F. Kennedy, America’s physical fitness was portrayed rhetorically as both a “crisis” and as an important dimension of the Cold War with the Soviet Union. Through repeated and consistent speeches and statements about sports and physical vigor, Kennedy urged Americans—especially America’s young people—to pay more attention to physical fitness and its importance to our democratic way of life. Kennedy’s rhetoric about the importance of physical fitness to our national security might have seemed absurd in the atomic age, when American’s security increasingly hinged on the strategic deployment of nuclear

weaponry. Yet Kennedy understood that the Cold War was a “war of words”—a psychological contest for the respect and sympathies of the rest of the world—rather than a war between armies. In this rhetorical contest, it was important that the United States not appear to be weak or physically “soft” in comparison to the Soviet Union. To the contrary, Kennedy hoped to convince both Americans and the rest of the world that a nation founded on democratic ideas could still maintain those vigorous, “manly” qualities that had made America great. Like Roosevelt, Kennedy understood fitness as a reflection of the nation’s character and identity, and so he defined it as part of what it *meant* to be an American—a responsibility of *citizenship* in our free society. If one aspired to serve the nation, whether in military uniform or as a volunteer in the Peace Corps or some similar program, it was important to be fit, both mentally *and* physically.

Kennedy’s rhetoric of physical vigor not only paved the way for future presidents to deploy the rhetoric of sport and physicality as part of their Cold War strategy, but also helped institutionalize sports and fitness as a governmental concern. He was careful to distinguish America’s approach to fitness from that of the Soviets, who subsidized their amateur athletes and required compulsory physical training. Yet, in Kennedy’s view, the government had a responsibility to encourage schools and communities to promote physical fitness among young people by providing opportunities for athletic activities and exercise. And the president, along with his Council on Physical Fitness, had a responsibility to assess the effectiveness of those efforts and to educate the people about the importance of physical fitness and vigor.

Kennedy was clearly successful at putting sports and physical fitness on the national agenda. In 1962, for example, *Time* magazine reported on the founding of the

first North American Outward Bound school in Colorado—a program that embraced Kennedy’s call for new “tests” of physical strength and fitness that also built the “character” of the participants.⁶⁴ Also crediting Kennedy’s initiative, a *New York Times* article discussed how colleges were adopting new fun, game-based fitness programs, along with more traditional physical education activities. According to the *Times*, four college students even walked 253 miles to Washington to show their support for the President’s Council on Physical Fitness.⁶⁵ In *The Saturday Evening Post*, R.M. Marshall cited the poor performance of the U.S. Olympic team, along with the dismal fitness test results that Kennedy himself cited, as proof that the president was right about the fitness crisis in America.⁶⁶ And George Munger, professor and director of physical education at the University of Pennsylvania, toured Europe to find out why their youth were tougher and stronger than American youth. Summarizing his findings in *Sports Illustrated*, Munger concluded that the U.S. had let its fitness facilities deteriorate and had lost its appetite for vigorous exercise.⁶⁷ Many other publications also weighed in on the fitness crisis in American, often reporting the results of physical fitness tests Kennedy was fond of publicizing.⁶⁸

In his “Progress Report on Physical Fitness,” Kennedy himself cited letters young people sent to the White House as evidence of the program’s success. He read from a number of those letters, including one from a Brooklyn schoolgirl: “I am happy about your Physical Fitness Plan. . . I turn cartwheels every chance I get. My parents are going out of their minds because I am always on my hands instead of my feet.” In another letter, a 12-year-old boy from Pennsylvania also reported that the program had changed his life: “I have took to mind what you have said about youth physical fitness. I not only

take gym in school, but I set aside an hour each day to have my own gym.” A young Los Angeles girl even felt compelled to report on a particular day’s achievement and how it had made her feel: “Dear President Kennedy, I have walked 8 miles and I was thirsty.”⁶⁹

While Kennedy’s rhetoric of physical vigor may have captured the public imagination at the time, its longer-term effects are harder to assess. As we shall see in the remaining chapters, subsequent presidents would take up the cause, further institutionalizing the promotion of sports and physical fitness as a concern of the executive branch. Presidents also would continue to talk about fitness and vigor as important components of responsible citizenship, urging Americans to “get involved” in sports and fitness programs. Not only do the activities of the President’s Council on Physical Fitness continue today, but presidents now use sports and fitness imagery more than ever both to shape their own images and to argue for their policy agendas.⁷⁰ Yet a half century later, America is arguably “softer” than ever and faces a growing obesity crisis. Days after his assassination in 1963, *Sports Illustrated* eulogized Kennedy as “The President Who Loved Sport.”⁷¹ But Americans today do not all share his preference for *participatory* over *spectator* sports.

Like Roosevelt, Kennedy crafted a vision of ideal citizenship comprised of both mental and physical vigor and service to the nation. Yet that vision was less about the health problems associated with obesity and sedentary lifestyles than the needs of the military and Cold War strategy. In proclaiming a “crisis” of fitness in America, Kennedy’s was identifying not a health but a military or a foreign policy problem. As such, it should come as no surprise that Kennedy’s Council on Physical Fitness recommended fitness programs that resembled the regimented drills of military training.

The Council's materials reflected little concern for gendered, disabled, or different bodies unsuited to such militaristic drills. As an embodiment of the ideals of citizenship, the fitness programs of that day thus tended to exclude many people from being "good citizens."

Kennedy's use of sport as a rhetorical weapon in the Cold War was also largely successful in some ways, but it too had some significant drawbacks. Politicizing sport, it led later presidents to emphasize the importance of winning athletic competition on the international stage, rather than encouraging participation in sport for its own sake. Many federal government initiatives, including Gerald Ford's Commission on Olympic Sports, spent taxpayer dollars on training and facilities designed to assure Olympic victory. Increasingly the Olympic Games themselves became highly politicized events, inspiring protests, boycotts, and even terrorist attacks, like the 1972 "Munich Massacre," in which members of the Israeli Olympic team were taken hostage and eventually killed by the Palestinian group Black September. In 1980, President Jimmy Carter finally broke from the American tradition of political detachment when it came to the Olympics and initiated an international boycott of the Moscow Games after the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan and installed its own government after assassinating the president.⁷² Ultimately, the politicization of the Olympic spectacle along with the focus on victory may have encouraged the trend toward spectatorship of athletic events rather than participation, eroding the capacity for sport to build the character of American citizenship in the way Kennedy envisioned.

Notes

¹ John Sayle Watterson, *The Games Presidents Play: Sports and the Presidency* (Baltimore, Md: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 38-39.

² Watterson, *The Games Presidents Play*, 201-203

³ John F. Kennedy, "Remarks to the Delegates to the Youth Fitness Conference, February 21, 1961," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, John F. Kennedy, 1961* (U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington: 1962), 112-113. The president spoke in the Health, Education, and Welfare Auditorium.

⁴ John M. Murphy, "The Heroic Tradition in Presidential Rhetoric," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 3 (2000): 469.

⁵ Murphy, "The Heroic Tradition in Presidential Rhetoric," 468.

⁶ John F. Kennedy, "The Vigor We Need," *Sports Illustrated*, July 16, 1962, 12-15.

⁷ Watterson, *The Games Presidents Play*, 201-202. Watterson also notes (p. 38) that Roosevelt suffered from asthma and was bullied as a sickly child, causing his father to hire a boxing trainer to lead the young Roosevelt through an intense physical regimen.

⁸ John F. Kennedy, "Executive Order 11074, January 8, 1963," Published in Federal Register 28, no. 11074, 259.

⁹ Sara Ann Mehlretter, "John F. Kennedy, Inaugural Address (20 January 1961)," *Voices of Democracy* 4 (2009): 41-59, accessed May 7, 2012, <http://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/>.

¹⁰ Steven R. Goldzwig and George N. Dionisopoulos, "*In a Perilous Hour:*" *The Public Address of John F. Kennedy* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995), 91-92.

¹¹ Denise M. Botsdorff, *The Presidency and the Rhetoric of Foreign Crisis* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), 25-26.

¹² Vito N. Silvestri, *Becoming JFK: A Profile in Communication* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2000), 281-284.

¹³ John F. Kennedy, "Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, John F. Kennedy, 1961* (U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington: 1962).

¹⁴ Thomas Domer, *Sport in Cold War America, 1953-1963: The Diplomatic and Political Use of Sport in the Eisenhower and Kennedy Administrations* (Dissertation for Marquette University's Department of Philosophy, Milwaukee, Wis, 1976).

¹⁵ Domer, *Sport in Cold War America*.

¹⁶ Thomas M. Hunt, "American Sport Policy and the Cultural Cold War: The Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Years," *Journal of Sport History* 33 (Fall 2006): 273-297.

¹⁷ Kurt Edward Kemper, *College Football and American Culture in the Cold War Era* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 1.

¹⁸ Paul Allen Carter, *Another Part of the Fifties* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 4, 10-11, 284.

¹⁹ Dorothy Stull. "U.S. Fitness, 1957: A 24-Page Report." *Sports Illustrated*, August 5, 1957, 28-45, 60-65.

²⁰ Jerry Cooke, "Sports in the U.S.S.R.," *Sports Illustrated*, December 2, 1957, 37-62.

²¹ Jeffrey Montez de Oca, "The 'Muscle Gap': Physical Education and U.S. Fears of a Depleted Masculinity, 1954-1963," in *East Plays West: Sport and the Cold War*, eds. Stephen Wagg and David L. Andrews (London: Routledge, 2006), 123.

²² The original report originally appeared in *The New York State Journal of Medicine* and was financed by John B. Kelly Sr., a wealthy Philadelphia businessman and former athlete. Disturbed by the findings, Kelly shared them with Pennsylvania senator James Duff, who brought the issue to the attention of President Eisenhower. *Sports Illustrated* published the results in its August 15 issue, after the report was discussed at a White House luncheon.

²³ Robert H. Boyle, "The Report That Shocked the President," *Sports Illustrated*, August 15, 1955, 30-33, 72-73.

²⁴ Unlike Kennedy, Eisenhower never issued public statements about the importance of physical fitness. The only significant mention of physical fitness found in the Presidential Papers was his Executive Order 10830 (Establishing a seal for the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sport) on July 24, 1959.

²⁵ Kennedy, "The Vigor We Need," 12.

²⁶ Stull, "U.S. Fitness, 1957," 28, 30.

²⁷ Cooke, "Sports in the U.S.S.R," 37-38.

²⁸ "Campers Are Told Fitness Aids U.S.," *New York Times*, March 11, 1962, 82.

²⁹ *Adult Physical Fitness: A Program for Men and Women* (United States Government Printing Office: 1963); *Physical Fitness Elements in Recreation: Suggestions for Community Programs* (United States Government Printing Office: 1962); and *Youth Physical Fitness: Suggested Elements of a School-Centered Program* (United States Government Printing Office: 1961).

³⁰ "Film to Urge Fitness," *New York Times*, January 26, 1962, 14.

³¹ An online search of the Public Papers of the Presidents using the American Presidency Project website (<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php>) revealed that the search term "physical fitness" culled 20 listings for John F. Kennedy. Only three listings were produced for the eight years of the Eisenhower presidency, and only ten results for Kennedy's successor, Lyndon B. Johnson.

³² John F. Kennedy, "The Soft American," *Sports Illustrated*, December 26, 1960, 15.

³³ Kennedy, "The Soft American," 15.

³⁴ Kennedy, "The Soft American," 16.

³⁵ Kennedy, "The Soft American," 16.

³⁶ Kennedy, "The Soft American," 16.

³⁷ Kennedy, "The Soft American," 17-18.

³⁸ Kennedy established the Peace Corps through executive order in 1961, and Congress approved it as a permanent federal agency operating within the State Department later that year. For more information, about the establishment of the Peace Corps, visit the JFK Presidential Library & Museum online at <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources/JFK+in+History/Peace+Corps.htm>.

³⁹ Kennedy, "Remarks to the Delegates to the Youth Fitness Conference, February 21, 1961."

⁴⁰ Kennedy's remarks were delivered in a White House news conference on July 19. The President returned to the rostrum and spoke to the members of the press who remained for the occasion. His remarks were recorded on film and tape for distribution to schools and to other interested groups. An abridged revision of the remarks appears as a foreword to the pamphlet "Youth Physical Fitness—Suggested Elements of a School-Centered Program," published by the President's Council on Youth Fitness in 1961.

⁴¹ John F. Kennedy, "Remarks on the Youth Fitness Program, July 19, 1961," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, John F. Kennedy, 1961* (U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington: 1962), 523-524. The president delivered his comments in a news conference. His remarks were recorded for distribution to schools and other interested groups, along with a government pamphlet containing suggestions for school-centered fitness programs.

⁴² John F. Kennedy, "Remarks on the Youth Fitness Program, July 19, 1961."

⁴³ *Youth Physical Fitness: Suggested Elements of a School-Centered Program* (U.S. Government Printing Office: July, 1961).

⁴⁴ John F. Kennedy, "Statement by the President on the Physical Fitness of Young Americans, September 5, 1961," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, John F. Kennedy, 1961* (U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington: 1962), 589. The statement was released at Hyannis, Massachusetts.

⁴⁵ Kennedy, "Statement by the President on the Physical Fitness of Young Americans, September 5, 1961."

⁴⁶ John F. Kennedy, "Address in New York City at the National Football Foundation and Hall of Fame Banquet, December 5, 1961," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, John F. Kennedy, 1961* (U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington: 1962), 770-773. During the banquet, the President received the National Football Foundation's Gold Medal for his promotion of the role of athletics in the development of civic and political leadership. In his speech, Kennedy congratulated the University of Alabama football team for its advancement to the Sugar Bowl before discussing the importance of improving the country's physical fitness, highlighting the recent establishment of the Council on Youth Fitness.

⁴⁷ Kennedy, "Address in New York City at the National Football Foundation and Hall of Fame Banquet, December 5, 1961."

⁴⁸ Kennedy, "Address in New York City at the National Football Foundation and Hall of Fame Banquet, December 5, 1961."

⁴⁹ Kennedy, "Address in New York City at the National Football Foundation and Hall of Fame Banquet, December 5, 1961."

⁵⁰ Kennedy, "Address in New York City at the National Football Foundation and Hall of Fame Banquet, December 5, 1961."

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- ⁵¹ Kennedy, "Address in New York City at the National Football Foundation and Hall of Fame Banquet, December 5, 1961."
- ⁵² Kennedy, "Address in New York City at the National Football Foundation and Hall of Fame Banquet, December 5, 1961."
- ⁵³ Kennedy, "Address in New York City at the National Football Foundation and Hall of Fame Banquet, December 5, 1961."
- ⁵⁴ John F. Kennedy, "Statement by the President in Response to a Report by the Council on Youth Fitness, July 9, 1962," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, John F. Kennedy, 1962* (U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington: 1963), 551.
- ⁵⁵ Kennedy, "Statement by the President in Response to a Report by the Council on Youth Fitness, July 9, 1962."
- ⁵⁶ Kennedy, "The Vigor We Need." Kennedy's article was published along with a statement on "The Whys and Hows of Fitness" by Charles B. (Bud) Wilkinson and a test for minimum physical fitness in *Sports Illustrated*, July 16, 1962, 14-15.
- ⁵⁷ Kennedy, "The Vigor We Need."
- ⁵⁸ Kennedy, "The Vigor We Need."
- ⁵⁹ Kennedy, "The Vigor We Need."
- ⁶⁰ John F. Kennedy, "Progress Report by the President on Physical Fitness, August 13, 1963," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, John F. Kennedy, 1963* (U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington: 1964), 624-628. The Progress Report was also printed as an article in *Look* magazine.
- ⁶¹ Kennedy, "Progress Report by the President on Physical Fitness, August 13, 1963."
- ⁶² Kennedy, "Progress Report by the President on Physical Fitness, August 13, 1963."
- ⁶³ Kennedy, "Progress Report by the President on Physical Fitness, August 13, 1963."
- ⁶⁴ "Education: Character, the Hard Way," *Time*, August 3, 1962, 34.
- ⁶⁵ "Youths Hike 253 Miles," *New York Times*, March 28, 1962, 24.
- ⁶⁶ R.M. Marshall, "Toughening Our Soft Generation." *The Saturday Evening Post*, June 23, 1962, 13-17.
- ⁶⁷ George Munger, "Challenge to Bud Wilkinson," *Sports Illustrated*, July 31, 1961, 38-43.

⁶⁸ See, for example, “Westport Schools Find Boys Too Fat For Pull-Up Tests,” *New York Times*, April 28 1962, 27; “Half of U.S. Youth Called Below Par in Physical Fitness,” *New York Times*, April 25, 1962, 36.

⁶⁹ John F. Kennedy, “Progress Report by the President on Physical Fitness, August 13, 1963.”

⁷⁰ John Sayle Watterson traced the historical relationship between sport and presidential policy and personality, arguing that the games that presidents play are “political games, carefully designed to burnish and shape presidential images and to send a message that the commander in chief, like many of his fellow Americans, is a sports fan” (Watterson, x).

⁷¹ “The President Who Loved Sport,” *Sports Illustrated*, Dec. 2, 1963, 20-21.

⁷² Watterson, *The Games Presidents Play*, 270-73.

Chapter Three:

Winning Is For Amateurs: Gerald Ford and the Rhetoric of Athletic Achievement

On July 8, 1974, one month before he would assume the office of the presidency, a relatively new and unknown Vice-President Gerald Ford graced the cover of *Sports Illustrated* magazine. He also was listed as the co-author of the issue's feature article, "In Defense of the Competitive Urge." Reflecting on his career as a star football player at the University of Michigan and his coaching days at Yale, Ford made the case for significance of athletic achievement in national, even international terms, as suggested by the article's subtitle: "International Athletic Victories Serve Nations Well." In this essay, Ford extended John F. Kennedy's arguments about the relationship between athletics and national strength, emphasizing even more the importance of athletics to national character. Ford expressed frustration that Americans "have been asked to swallow a lot of home-cooked psychology in recent years that winning isn't all that important anymore, whether on the athletic field or in any other field, national and international." Ford wrote, "I don't buy that for a minute. It is not enough to just compete. Winning is very important. Maybe more important than ever."¹

Ford's statement that it was now "more important than ever" for America to compete internationally might have reflected his sense that the Cold War had evolved to a turning point. Or perhaps he was reacting more specifically to the "Munich Massacre" at the 1972 Summer Olympic Games, which soured many people on the whole idea of international athletic competitions.² Whatever his thinking, Ford was clear in linking athletic success to national character. "Broadly speaking," he wrote, "there are few

things more important to a country's growth and well-being than competitive athletics." Ford went on to explain why he considered athletic success so important to the nation's success:

If it is a cliché to say athletics build character as well as muscle, then I subscribe to the cliché. It has been said, too, that we are losing our competitive spirit in this country, the thing that made us great, the guts of the free-enterprise system. I don't agree with that; the competitive urge is deep-rooted in the American character. I do wonder sometimes if we are adjusting to the times, or if we have been spoiled by them.

Why was it so important to Ford that the U.S. "compete successfully with other nations?" For one thing, he asserted that not only the Russians "but many nations" were now "growing and challenging" the U.S. If the U.S. hoped to continue as a world leader, it had "an obligation to set high standards." And according to Ford, there was no "better advertisement for a nation's good health than a healthy athletic representation." Athletics had become an "extraordinarily swift avenue of communication," he argued, and the "broader the achievement the greater the impact." Pointing to his otherwise discredited predecessor's use of sport to achieve a historic breakthrough in U.S.-China relations, Ford concluded: "There is much to be said for Ping-Pong diplomacy."³

On the twilight of his own ascension to the presidency, Ford urged citizens to consider that a "sports triumph" could be "as uplifting to a nation's spirit as, well, a battlefield victory."⁴ When he assumed office just one month later, it came as no surprise, then, that he tried to use the rhetoric of sport to lift the nation's spirit in the wake of the Watergate scandal. Ford, the "accidental president," tried to assure his fellow

Americans that he was up to the job, and his ethos as an accomplished collegiate athlete helped him do that. More importantly, his celebration of the values associated with athletic achievement reflected one of his policy goals: more support for amateur athletics in America. Ford's rhetoric of athletic achievement, particularly his honoring of U.S. Olympic athletes, was part of a broader effort to help American amateur athletes be more competitive on the international stage.

This chapter examines how Ford attempted to use sport and American athletic success as a rhetorical tool in his effort to win re-election as the candidate who rebuilt America's pride and confidence after Watergate. Specifically, I consider how Ford, in an August 5, 1976 White House ceremony, honored the 1976 U.S. Olympic team and awarded the Presidential Medal of Honor to Olympic athlete Jesse Owens. This speech served both deliberative and epideictic functions, as Ford used the success of the American athletes to argue that more funding be put toward supporting Olympic sports while also linking sports to the ideals of democratic citizenship. Through linking athletic accomplishment to American character, Ford set an important precedent for later presidents. Following Ford's lead, every subsequent president has honored champion athletes at the White House, formally recognizing these select athletic figures as embodiments of American ideals. Every subsequent president also has presented the Presidential Medal of Freedom to a long list of notable sports figures, including Jackie Robinson, Joe Louis, Arthur Ashe, Hank Aaron, Muhammad Ali, Arnold Palmer, and Joe DiMaggio.⁵ Particularly because many of these athletes had been at the center of heated controversies over their character or patriotism, honoring them has helped presidents to broaden the definition of what it means to be a "great American."

In linking athletes and athletics to American values, Ford inaugurated rhetorical themes that also would persist long after his presidency. Although Kennedy's rhetoric tied sporting success to the physical strength of the nation during the Cold War, Ford took this idea a step further by contending that athletic success was not just indicative of America's strength but a reflection of America's core values, such as individualism, freedom, and democratic rule. Put another way, Ford set a *rhetorical* precedent for symbolically equating athletic success with "good citizenship" in America.⁶ The fact that he chose amateur athletes in general, and Jesse Owens in particular, helped to define "good citizenship" in a particular light. Ford reinforced mythology associated with the American Dream—the notion that good citizens can overcome obstacles and rise to great levels of success through hard work, determination, persistence, and humility. Amateur athletes, and black athletes in particular, are embodiments of these types of good citizens who earned their success through the purest of means.

I begin by reflecting on the tradition of presidential sports encomia, which actually dates back to President Ford and reflects an important relationship between sports and citizenship in American culture. Next, I discuss how the Presidential Medal of Freedom became part of the rhetoric of sport, focusing on Ford's choice of Jesse Owens as the first sports figure to receive that honor. In the final section of the chapter, I discuss how Ford used a speech to the U.S. Olympic Team on August 5, 1976 to articulate his view of the role of amateur sports in building character and instilling the attributes of good citizenship. He also used the occasion to call for more governmental support for Olympic athletes. Utilizing memoranda and drafts of the speech from his presidential archives,⁷ I show how Ford and his speechwriting team made the argument that the

federal government could provide more funding to help train U.S. Olympians without violating the amateur ideology, and at the same time, making the U.S. team more competitive with the Soviet and Communist bloc teams that had dominated recent Olympic Games. Honoring Olympic hero Jesse Owens with the Presidential Medal of Freedom in this rhetorical endeavor both bolstered Ford's deliberative argument about amateur ideals and fulfilled an epideictic function by allowing the president to define the ideal citizen in terms of traits associated with athletic success.

Visiting the White House: Presidential Sports Encomia

Teddy Roosevelt may have practiced jiu-jitsu in the White House, and the Kennedy boys played touch football on the White House lawn, but the tradition of honoring champion athletes at the White House is a more recent phenomenon. Rhetorical scholar Michael Hester has traced the practice back to the Carter administration, when the former Georgia Governor invited the National Basketball Association's Washington Bullets to the White House after they won the NBA championship.⁸ Subsequently, every president has honored sports teams, both professional and amateur, with similar "presidential sports encomia,"⁹ as Hester has labeled these events. Some presidents have extended the honor to individual athletes as well.¹⁰ For example, Clinton recognized tennis great Arthur Ashe in 1993. George W. Bush paid tribute to golfer Arnold Palmer in 2004. Coaches have also been venerated, including Paul "Bear" Bryant (1983/Reagan) and longtime University of Tennessee women's head basketball coach Pat Summitt (2012/Obama).

At the surface, these ceremonial occasions might seem simple exercises in national pride, but Hester argues that they have deeper political significance. Bringing together chief executives and athletic victors “in a rhetorical moment synthesizing sports and politics,”¹¹ presidential sports encomia combine “commemoration of athletic achievement and political opportunism,” allowing presidents to bolster their own images and tout “the policies of their administration” while ostensibly participating in a purely ceremonial event.¹² In the speeches they deliver on such occasions, presidents typically uphold the accomplishments of sports heroes as “exemplary characteristics of a national identity,” and in doing so, presidents can “articulate an American civil religion consistent with the institutional role of the presidency in preserving the political and social order.”¹³ Through the words spoken by presidents and the deferential reactions by the teams being honored, the institution of the presidency is reaffirmed as the “symbolic guardian” of national unity. The office is depicted as both properly concerned with the athletic achievements as well as being appropriately qualified to speak on the significance of these accomplishments.¹⁴

Carter was the first president to publically honor professional athletes and reflect upon the significance of their achievements. It was Gerald Ford, however, who first honored Olympic athletes at a formal ceremony in the East Garden of the White House, and he also was the first to award an individual athlete with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. In doing so, he performed many of the rhetorical functions of presidential sports encomia, as described by Hester. Injecting “athletic accomplishment with a political and social significance that extends far beyond the playing field,” he held up these sports champions as “national heroes” and performed “a cultural ritual” in which

the public was “reminded what it means to be an American—who we are and who we should strive to be.”¹⁵ As embodiments of the “American spirit,” as Hester notes, sports heroes are “ready-made” for presidents who, like Ford, want to relate “victory in sports” to the “components required of success in the construction of economic programs, foreign policy, or the maintenance of the nation.”¹⁶

By constructing athletes as “ideal Americans,” presidential sports encomia have the potential to unify the nation and reshape national identity in ways that transcend both class and partisan divisions.¹⁷ As Richard Lipsky has argued, “the world of sports” has become a site of “national and social communication” because “interest in and knowledge of sports” has made Americans of every region and class ‘available’ to one another.” Lipsky describes sport as “the ‘magic elixir’ that feeds personal identity while it nourishes the bonds of communal solidarity.”¹⁸ Sports, and the values associated with athletic success, are a resource that presidents can use to define the American political community, a task that Vanessa Beasley has reminded us is essential to rhetorically constructing “the people.”¹⁹ Sports symbolism is especially effective as a rhetorical and ideological tool because it is flexible, available to political leaders on both the right and the left.²⁰ When a president celebrates a particular athlete or a team from some specific city in the U.S., he is not just honoring their success but holding them up as model American citizens.

Understanding the rhetorical significance of presidential sports encomia provides a context for interpreting Gerald Ford’s August 5, 1976 White House ceremony in which he congratulates the medal winners from the Summer Games and awards the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Jesse Owens. Ford leveraged an opportunity to define his vision of

citizenship ideals, in light of the upcoming election, while also attempting to rebuild American pride in the post-Watergate era. He also capitalized on his own credibility as an athlete (and a contemporary of Jesse Owens) to establish his presidential authority, which was shaky at best in the shadow of Watergate and his pardoning of Richard Nixon. Lastly, Ford set a precedent for celebrating athletes as ideal citizens—one that has been followed and formalized by every subsequent administration.

Jesse Owens and the Presidential Medal of Freedom

Beyond the presidential sports encomia, another specific act that presidents can use to honor athletes is to award them with the highest civilian honor: the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Ronald Reagan once said, “What the Olympic Gold Medal is to athletes, what the Congressional Medal of Honor is to the military, the Presidential Medal of Freedom is to the private United States citizen.”²¹ Harry Truman originally established the “Medal of Freedom” to honor civilians who aided the American war effort during World War II, but the award was given so liberally and without any defined criteria in the early years that it lost some of its significance.²² When John F. Kennedy became president, he renamed and reinvigorated the award as the “Presidential Medal of Freedom,” issuing Executive Order 11085 to establish new procedures and guidelines for the award. According to that order, the award was to be given only for “especially meritorious contribution to (1) the security or national interests of the United States, or (2) world peace, or (3) cultural or other significant public or private endeavors.” Kennedy’s order also specified that the award was to be made “on or about July 4 of each

year,” but that the President could make the award at other times as well if he deemed that “appropriate.”²³

Still, Kennedy’s executive order allowed individual presidents a great deal of discretion on what qualified as an “especially meritorious contribution.” In a statement on the order, Kennedy explained that “in a period when the national government must call upon an increasing portion of the talents and energies of its citizens, it is clearly appropriate to provide ways to recognize and reward the work of persons, within and without the Government, who contribute significantly to the quality of American life.”²⁴ Yet Kennedy’s order did cut back on the number of awards by establishing new procedures and “safeguards to ensure that the President will receive considered and prudent advice as to those who should receive such honors.”²⁵ Essentially, Kennedy attempted to underscore the prestige of the award, while also opening up the award to the growing number of institutions impacting the culture. Since then, Medal of Freedom winners have come from a broad range of fields, including government and civil service, science, literature, film and television, medicine, law, music, and sports, with Ronald Reagan dispensing the award most liberally in recent years. Ford, however, was the first to bestow the Presidential Medal of Freedom upon a prominent athlete.

On the fortieth anniversary of the Berlin Olympics, it was fitting that President Gerald Ford chose to honor the hero of those games, track and field athlete Jesse Owens. Owens holds an undeniable place in U.S. history and popular culture for his role in “Hitler’s Olympics” in 1936. That Olympiad was more politically charged than any in history because the leader of the Third Reich had hoped to use the games to showcase the superiority of the Aryan race.²⁶ Moreover, Hitler’s discriminatory laws preventing

German Jews from participating in Olympic competition sparked an international controversy and calls for a boycott. In the United States, the decision to allow American athletes to compete was hotly debated.²⁷ Although the international uproar encouraged Hitler to be on “good behavior” during games, he still looked forward to “a stirring exhibition of Aryan athletic supremacy” because of the great expense he had gone to in preparing the German team.²⁸

Despite Hitler’s best efforts, however, it was Jesse Owens—a “brown-skinned young American who carried 165 pounds on a compact but slender 5’ 10” frame, on legs beautifully chiseled by nature”—who stole the show.²⁹ Owens dominated the prestigious track and field competition, winning four gold medals and scoring 40 points for the U.S. team (nearly two-thirds of the entire German team’s total for track and field).³⁰ He also smashed several world records in the premier events—the 100-meter dash, the long jump, the 200-meter sprint, and the 400-meter relay—with all four records remaining unbroken until at least the 1950s.³¹ This achievement earned Owens acclaim as “the man who outran Hitler.”³² With the political controversy surrounding the 1936 Olympic competition, Owens is often remembered as competing for democratic ideals just as much as for his own personal glory. In collective memory, Owens has a metonymic relationship with the United States, in which his individual triumph functioned as a victory for the nation.

Although the Germans dominated the 1936 Games outside of track and field and outscored the United States in total team points, Jesse Owens became an American idol overnight and a celebrated household name throughout the world—even in Germany.³³ Owens’s accomplishment was touted as a psychological victory over Nazi Germany as

well as a breakthrough for African-American athletes, who were still largely ignored by many southern newspapers.³⁴ U.S. citizens considered Owens's records to be "American assets,"³⁵ which at the time was unusual for African-American athletes, given the rampant discrimination of the era.

Although Jackie Robinson often is credited with "breaking the color barrier" in professional sports, Jesse Owens, along with boxer Joe Louis, paved the way for the U.S. to embrace the athletic accomplishments of African-Americans.³⁶ As a sophomore at the Ohio State University, Owens set a world record in the long jump during the 1935 Big Ten track and field championships. Looking ahead toward the 1936 Olympic Games, the meet announcer encouraged the crowd to "no longer say 'Owens of Ohio State,' but 'Owens of the United States.'"³⁷ Celebrated sports writer Grantland Rice declared Owens to be the all-time greatest African-American athlete because of "the sport he chose and for the way he mastered it."³⁸

Given his historic accomplishments, it should perhaps come as no surprise that Jesse Owens became the first sports figure to be awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom.³⁹ But Ford did more than just award the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Jesse Owens. He made the awarding of that honor the centerpiece of a White House ceremony and address recognizing the 1976 Olympic team and reaffirming the importance of U.S. Olympic success. In the process, he created an precedent for inviting athletes to the White House to be recognized in a formal ceremony as ideal Americans. Although other cultural icons such as Academy Award-winners or Grammy-winning musicians are often invited to the White House, athletes are uniquely, ritualistically, and publicly honored by the president. In upholding both the individual accomplishments of

Owens and the team spirit of the Olympic athletes, Ford also inaugurated some of the themes that would persist in presidential rhetoric linking athletic performance to the ideals of citizenship.

The “Accidental President” and the Rhetoric of Athletic Achievement

When Gerald Ford assumed the presidency, he was relatively unknown to the American people. What little people did know about their new president’s personal history often revolved around sports. Ford was beloved as a star collegiate athlete when he played center for the University of Michigan football team. In the balloting for the 1935 Collegiate All-Star game, Ford was the number-four vote-getter among fans around the nation. Two professional football franchises, the Detroit Lions and Green Bay Packers, even offered Ford a contract. Instead, he accepted a position at Yale University, where he served as assistant line coach for the varsity football team, head coach of the junior varsity team, and coach of the boxing team.⁴⁰

Ford is sometimes referred to as “the accidental president” in that he was never elected to the office. In fact, he attained the position of President of the United States without ever being elected to any office except congressman from Michigan’s Fifth District.⁴¹ It is widely believed that Ford may not even have been Nixon’s first choice as a vice-presidential successor after Spiro Agnew resigned; Nixon might have preferred the administrative and political capabilities of John Connally while retaining the advantage of keeping the likeable Ford in a position of power in the House of Representatives as the Watergate scandal unfolded.⁴² Relying upon counsel from his colleagues in both the

House and Senate, however, Nixon finally chose Ford as his vice-presidential running mate.⁴³

When Ford assumed the office of the presidency, voter confidence in elected officials was at an all-time low. Ford occupied a tenuous position: he was expected to restore honor and integrity to the White House, yet he had undermined much of his own credibility by pardoning Richard Nixon. Despite Ford's contention that a long, drawn-out trial would jsbr irrevocably damaged the country, many Americans simply refused to accept Ford's rationale.⁴⁴ Even before he made the decision, Ford knew from his own polling that six percent of the population would vote against him because of the pardon.⁴⁵ Especially for those who suspected that Ford had struck a deal with Nixon, the decision to pardon Nixon clearly hurt Ford's reputation as a man of high character and good judgment.

When Ford took office, most political experts agreed that it would take a long time to "heal the torn fabric of the American political system."⁴⁶ Although the specter of the Nixon pardon hung over his presidency, Ford actually made tremendous progress toward restoring public trust in the presidency. *Washington Post* political columnist Lou Cannon compared Ford's role as president to that of a caretaker, and the message he hoped to send was clear: "Here was a president who was trusted again; here was a president who was not afraid to take questions; here was a president who had respect for the people who covered the White House."⁴⁷ In retrospect, Ford's "caretaker" image may not have served him well in the 1976 election, but he did restore "a condition of equilibrium" to the nation because he seemed "such a trusting and good person." As Cannon concluded, however, he "got almost no credit for having accomplished that."⁴⁸

With the election just months away, Ford thus faced an uphill battle in his effort to win election in his own right. Ford was not an experienced campaigner on the national scene, having only campaigned for election to Congress from Michigan's Fifth District. Indeed, Ford was the only incumbent president ever to run for a second term without any previous national campaign experience. Thus, Ford had to find opportunities to campaign from the White House, and recognizing the 1976 Olympic Team provided just such an opportunity. In 1975, Ford had appointed a special Commission on Olympic Sports, and in July 1976 addressed the U.S. Olympic team as it prepared for the summer games in Montreal, reminding the athletes of their duty to "extend America's goodwill to the rest of the world." In that speech, Ford offered the Olympic athletes the opportunity to help the nation heal and unify after the strain of Watergate, Vietnam, and the Civil Rights movement:

I might take just a minute--if you look back 4 years or 8 years ago, we in this country, for a variety of reasons, were not unified. We had difficulties within our country. But if you watched any of the activities on the Fourth of July of our Bicentennial Year, you could almost feel--not only in Philadelphia, in Valley Forge, and in New York, but the news media reported all over the country--a real new rebirth of American unity and spirit and determination. That is a great way for us to enter our third century. That is a century all of you are really going to live in and work in and help to make a better America.⁴⁹

By issuing this challenge, Ford set in motion his administration's plan to deliver a follow-up speech during which we could congratulate the medal winners while also arguing for the adoption of policy recommendations from his Commission on Olympic

Sports. Specifically, Ford wanted to champion his proposal to provide funding for a permanent winter sports facilities at Lake Placid, New York, which would be used for the 1980 Winter Olympics and beyond to train American Olympic athletes. He also asked Congress to extend the tenure of the Commission until January, 1977, so that it could recommend additional means for funding the development of Olympic athletes without violating the amateur ideology.

In such an address, which was scheduled to take place immediately on the heels of the Summer Games in Montreal, Ford would need to negotiate both the deliberative and epideictic requirements of the situation. By inviting the medal-winning athletes to the White House to honor them in person, along with the members of the Commission on Olympic Sports, Ford created a newsworthy press event. Awarding the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Owens on the fortieth anniversary of “Hitler’s Olympics” amplified the magnitude of the occasion.

Archives from the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library in Ann Arbor, Michigan, show that Ford’s speechwriting team prepared extensively for the August 5 address. The case file of the speechwriting team shows that planning for the address to the Olympic athletes began on July 29, 1976. The ceremony was to take place about a week later, on Thursday, August 5, 1976, at 3:00 p.m. in the East Garden.⁵⁰ David Boorstin’s first draft is dated August 4, just one day before the speech was delivered, presumably in part so that he could account for the final results of the Olympic Games and any new information or recommendations the Commission on Olympic Sports.⁵¹ The case file does not make it clear as to whether Ford contributed edits to the speech personally. However, the edited drafts of Ford’s August 5 address reveal that his speechwriters, in conversations

with the president, wrestled with the potential contradiction between denouncing Hitler's political exploitation of the Olympics and Ford's advocacy of more government support for the U.S. Olympic team. In general terms, head speechwriter Bob Orben has described his access to the president as "amazing," recounting two hourly meetings per week to discuss the upcoming schedule of speaking events.⁵² Orben insisted that Ford made the critical decisions about the content of his major speeches. "He either went with one of the options or told us, 'No, I don't want to do that. This is the area we should cover.'"⁵³ Because of Ford's personal passion for sports and the fact that he had made the Commission on Olympic Sports a pet project, it seems reasonable to speculate that Ford had at least some level of input in the draft.

The speech archives do not definitively answer how and when Ford arrived at the decision to award the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Jesse Owens as part of the ceremony. But there were clear reasons for doing so. The most basic reason seems to be that 1976 marked the 40th anniversary of the 1936 Olympics, a historical moment of great athletic and political triumph for the United States. Moreover, the 1936 Olympics seemed to carry some special personal significance for Ford. During his July 10 remarks to the Olympic Team, he mentioned his friend and fellow congressman Ralph Metcalfe, who had competed in the 1936 Olympic track and field competition alongside Jesse Owens.⁵⁴ A document in the speechwriting file refers to other participants in the 1936 Olympic Games who Ford also knew, including fellow University of Michigan athletes Dick Degener (springboard diving) and Sam Stoller (track).⁵⁵ Perhaps most significantly, Owens was a student-athlete at Ohio State at the same time that Ford played football at OSU's Big Ten rival, the University of Michigan. In his remarks addressing Owens on

August 5, Ford recalls being one of more than 10,000 spectators who saw the track star break three world records and tie a fourth during the 1935 Big Ten meet in Ann Arbor. Although there is no indication that Ford ever interacted with Owens during those years, it is easy to imagine the special connection Ford might have felt when Owens competed in the 1936 Olympics. Furthermore, given his own affinity for sport, Ford simply may have been expressing a personal preference in awarding the Medal of Freedom to an athlete for the first time.⁵⁶

Honoring Owens also provided a good opportunity for Ford to demonstrate his commitment to supporting amateur athletes, which was the task he assigned to his Commission on Olympic Sports—and the main deliberative issue at stake in his August 5 remarks. While honoring the achievements of the American medalists, Ford also sought to discredit the higher medal counts earned by the Soviet Union and East Germany. Addressing the 1976 medal winners, Ford wasted no time in distinguishing between the genuine amateurs on the U.S. Olympic team and the more professionally trained athletes of the Soviet bloc teams: “Your achievements are more impressive, in my judgment, for the fact you were up against some of the athletes whose training is subsidized in various ways by their governments.” The President then connected that qualitative difference to the competing values of the free and the communist world: “In this country it has always been up to those with talent to make their own way in training and in preparing for the highest level of competition. Our belief in the independence of the athlete and the importance of the amateur tradition has held us back from all-out government support.”⁵⁷ While advocating for Olympic funding, Ford thus attempted to distinguish between *how* the U.S. and its adversaries supported their athletes, suggesting that America’s national

ideals required that athletic success be rooted in hard work, perseverance, and individual initiative, not state support. In the modern Olympics, however, those ideals were increasingly compromised by the drive to win. With the Soviets and other Eastern block countries fielding teams of paid professionals, how could the U.S. compete?

Ford refused to concede that the U.S. could no longer compete, nor did he try to downplay the importance of winning. Ford never acknowledged that the Americans technically finished third in the medal standings behind the Soviet Union and East Germany. Instead, Ford highlighted the Americans' ample medal count at that year's summer games (94) as evidence that the U.S. athletes *could* compete successfully despite their disadvantages. But, he suggested, more could be done without compromising either their amateur status or their ideals. Upholding victory as the ultimate goal (and, by implication, victory over the Communist bloc), he instead suggested that the Federal Government could "do more to help athletically talented young people achieve their very best in the Olympic competition."⁵⁸ Referring vaguely to "creative ideas" employed by other countries to support their athletes while maintaining their amateur status, he offered few specifics but did call upon Congress to extend the life of the Commission on Olympic Sports so that it might "address the problem of sports organization in the United States [and] recommend effective mechanisms for funding training and development of our Olympic competitors."⁵⁹ Ultimately, Ford wanted to provide federal funding for the American athletes without resorting to direct subsidies that seemed to be creating success for the Soviets, but that violated the amateur spirit of the Olympics.

Jesse Owens presumably embodied the ideals Ford celebrated in his August 5 speech. Declaring that "a great athletic performance is a personal achievement before it

is a national achievement,”⁶⁰ Ford recounted how the broad jump record Owens set at the 1935 Big Ten track and field championship stood for 25 years, then recalled each of the individual events Owens won in 1936, concluding that Owens “personally achieved what no statesman, journalist or general achieved at that time—he forced Adolph [sic] Hitler to leave the stadium rather than acknowledge the superb victories of a black American.”⁶¹ In fact, Hitler’s “snubbing” of Owens at the 1936 Olympics is something of a myth, as Hitler actually refused to congratulate any of the winners after the International Olympic Committee (I.O.C.) complained about his selective acknowledgment of some of the early winners.⁶² Nevertheless, the myth served Ford well, as he sought to distinguish between Hitler’s politicization of the Olympics in 1936 and his own position on supporting Olympic athletes.

After the Munich Massacre of 1972 and the boycott of the 1976 Olympics by a number of nations,⁶³ Ford tried to position himself as opposed to political interference in the Olympic Games. He reminded the audience that the 1976 games had “their share of controversy,” and that “(i)nternational politics sometimes threatened to overshadow athletic achievements.” He acknowledged that the press coverage of the 1976 Games over the previous two weeks had often centered on political controversy, and that he had even heard some pundits “calling for the Olympic flame to be permanently extinguished.”⁶⁴ Reaffirming his commitment to the Games, Ford took issue with those who would end the Olympics just to avoid potential political conflicts. Instead, he envisioned a return to the ancient spirit of the Olympics as an event that transcended international politics: “I am confident that the Olympic Games can be freed from world politics in the

future, reviving the spirit of sacred armistice which prevailed at the original Games hundreds of years ago.”⁶⁵

Ford’s optimism may have been naïve, but the values he celebrated were widely shared. Insisting that “(t)he challenges that all athletes face in common are more important than the boundaries that divide them,” Ford pledged a return to the “true spirit of the Olympic games.”⁶⁶ That would mean an Olympics free from international politics, and he assured his listeners that the U.S. would do its part when it hosted the Games in 1980:

It is in that spirit that I pledge our efforts to ensure that in 1980, at which time we will be hosting the Olympic Games in Lake Placid, politics be kept out of the arena. We will welcome every team recognized by the International Olympic Committee. Attempts to use the Olympic Games for international power politics will ultimately backfire.

This, he insisted, was ultimately the lesson to be learned from “our friend Jesse Owens, here with us today.” According to Ford, when Hitler tried to “turn the Games into a spectacle that would glorify racist dogma of the Nazi state” in 1936, there was a “strong movement in the United States against our participation in the games.” As it turned out, however, “U.S. participation in those Olympics provided a sharp rebuke of Hitler's racist rubbish.” Not only did five black Americans win “eight gold medals in track and field,” but one American athlete in particular “proved that excellence knows no racial or political limits.” That man, of course, was Jesse Owens.⁶⁷

Thus, Ford held up Owens not only as a model of a great athlete but also a great American—one who embodied the ideals of hard work, personal motivation, and perseverance. In doing so, he perhaps sought to transcend politics, celebrating athletic success as an individual rather than a national achievement: “Whatever their nationality, all athletes are working against the same physical and mental constraints of the human body, of gravity and time.”⁶⁸ In honoring Owens, however, Ford had picked an athlete who embodied not only the Olympic spirit but the American dream, for he had risen from poverty to become a sports icon:

Giants like Jesse Owens show us why politics will never defeat the Olympic spirit. His character, his achievements have continued to inspire Americans as they did the whole world in 1936.

He brought his own talents into the service of others. As a speaker, as an author, as a coach, he has inspired many young men and women to achieve their very best for themselves and for America. As an American who rose from poverty to a position of leadership, he has motivated many, many others to make the most of what America has to offer.⁶⁹

Here, Ford positions Owens’s athletic accomplishments in the Olympic Games as the lynchpin for his success throughout life. He also credits Owens’s record of service as being inspired by the same values that contributed to his Olympic triumph. By implication, Owens was a worthy recipient of the Medal of Freedom not just for that one moment in time during the 1936 games, but through his continued deeds as a good citizen and a fundamental mentality of character.

Despite all of these accolades, Ford explained in his August 5 speech that Owens had remained “a modest man” one who was probably wondering “why I am singing his praises here today.” Thus, Owens exhibited yet another personal virtue intrinsic to the ideal citizen: humility. Yet however humble the man, his achievement would have a lasting impact, according to Ford. As he presented the award to Owens and read the citation accompanying it, Ford reflected on the inspiration he hoped Owens would become for other young athletes dreaming of Olympic gold:

Jesse, it is my privilege to present you today with the Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor that your country can bestow. And I present you with this medal on behalf of the people of the United States. For them in particular, and especially for the athletes like those here today, your character, your achievements will always be a source of inspiration.

The citation reads as follows: “To Jesse Owens, athlete, humanitarian, speaker, author—a master of the spirit as well as the mechanics of sport. He is a winner who knows that winning is not everything. He has shared with others his courage, his dedication to the highest ideals of sportsmanship. His achievements have shown us all the promise of America and his faith in America has inspired countless others to do their best for themselves and for their country.”

Thus, Ford held up Jesse Owens as an example of “the American Dream”—an individual who overcame many challenges, including poverty and the discriminatory derision of Hitler, to achieve his goals and lead a rich, well-rounded life. Owens’ story fit so well into the American Dream narrative, making him an obvious choice as the first Olympic athlete to win the Presidential Medal of Freedom. But in so recognizing Owens,

Ford hoped to do more than honor a worthy individual. Given that Owens's success came at one of the most highly politicized Olympics in history, he also hoped to celebrate American ideals and tout his own position on the political controversies that still surrounded international Olympic competition. Ford reminded listeners that Owens had stood up to Hitler, that he had "received a standing ovation when he urged his audience, and I quote, 'To stand fast with us for freedom and democracy.'"⁷⁰ By constructing Owens's participation in the 1936 Olympics as "a sharp rebuke of Hitler's racist rubbish," Ford underscored that athletic achievement could send positive political messages. Notwithstanding his professed desire to separate the Olympics from international politics, Ford presented Owens as an American who had used sport to celebrate America's most prized ideals—freedom and democracy.

Conclusion

Each Olympic cycle seems to inevitably tangle sports with politics. Although more recent Games have not been as tense as they were during the Cold War, or as violent as they were during the Munich Massacre in 1972, controversy still thrives. The most recent Olympics at the time of this writing, the 2014 Winter Games in Sochi, were clouded by widespread reports of shoddy hotels and facilities, along with numerous protests against Russia's "anti-gay propaganda" law.⁷¹ At the same time, each Olympic Games allows every nation to reflect upon its own political identity and how its Olympic representatives reproduce and embody that identity.

In 1976, Gerald Ford set a precedent by rhetorically constructing U.S. Olympic athletes as personifications of American ideals. It is worth highlighting that only the *medal-winning* athletes were invited to celebrate at the White House, emphasizing that, first and foremost, victory and accomplishment are at the core of those American values. Ford celebrated the triumphs of the Olympians and Jesse Owens as being the products of individual effort and determination, rehearsing fundamental and communal values in an epideictic fashion. Yet he also made deliberative arguments by distinguishing the achievements of the amateur American athletes as being more pure and deserved than the medals won by the Soviet bloc and its professional-caliber competitors. While arguing to preserve the amateur values held by the U.S., Ford also urged the federal government to pledge more financial support for training and facilities. With such support, Ford suggested that the U.S. could compete with and even surpass the Olympic achievements of the Soviet Union.

Ford lamented past politicization of the Olympics, especially by Hitler in 1936, and he pledged to keep politics out of the upcoming 1980 Lake Placid Olympic Games. In the final analysis, however, the speech in which he made that promise was itself a political speech in which he celebrated American ideals, argued for policy support, and promoted his own reelection. Ford's implicit argument, of course, was that Hitler exploited the Olympics for political goals that were racist, authoritarian, and anti-democratic—and he had a point. Yet Ford, no less than Hitler, recognized the power of sporting rhetoric to define a nation's international image and establish its claim to leadership. For Ford, no less than Hitler, it was therefore important to “win.”

Ford's ongoing campaign to support the Olympic Games and his validation of the importance of amateur sports set a strong precedent for subsequent administrations. The practice of upholding athletes—and the character values associated with athletic achievement—became something of a institutionalized presidential ritual, one carried on by each administration—and even expanded, as the next chapter will demonstrate. Athletes, specifically those athletes who have attained the highest levels of success, are now regularly celebrated as ideal citizens. Nearly every year, the president selects at least one sporting figure as one of his Medal of Freedom recipients. During international competition, as in the case of Jesse Owens, presidents have celebrated the success of American athletes as a triumph of democracy. So, despite Ford's entreaty to separate politics from sports, presidents have learned that sports pose numerous rhetorical opportunities to define their visions of citizenship, to argue for policies, and to bolster their own leadership traits.

Particularly striking in Ford's case, of course, was his selection of Jesse Owens as the symbolic embodiment of American ideals. Owens had been the victim of racism and discrimination within his own nation. His triumph this *could* be interpreted as an example of an individual overcoming barriers erected by a corrupt political system. Instead, he was portrayed as the ideal citizen and a testament to the American Dream. That might be interpreted as an example of “tokenism,”⁷² or the practice of holding up a few black citizens as evidence that racial equality has been achieved in America. The celebration of Owens was not unlike how Oprah Winfrey has been appropriated as a symbol of the American Dream, an appropriation that rhetorical scholar Dana Cloud has labeled a rhetoric of tokenism.⁷³ Like Winfrey, Owens's story has been framed as the

story of a poor black citizen who realized the American Dream despite the obstacles, with little mention of the structural barriers to equality in America. Following Owens's success, other prominent black sporting figures have likewise been held up as exemplars of the American Dream, including Jackie Robinson, Joe Louis, Arthur Ashe, Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, and Venus and Serena Williams. For most of these figures, the story of their success was more complicated than a simple rags-to-riches story, but the myth of sport-as-social-mobility continues to thrive today through the example of a number of popular black sporting figures—figures who continue to inspire many Americans, including the first black president of the United States, Barack Obama.

Notes

¹ Gerald R. Ford and John Underwood, “In Defense of the Competitive Urge,” *Sports Illustrated* (July 8, 1974), p. 17.

² The Palestinian group Black September attacked eleven members of the Israeli national team, taking them hostage and eventually killing them. Competition was suspended—temporarily—for the first time in the history of the Modern Games.

³ Ford and Underwood, “In Defense of the Competitive Urge, 17.

⁴ Ford and Underwood, “In Defense of the Competitive Urge, 17.

⁵ See

http://www.senate.gov/pagelayout/reference/two_column_table/Presidential_Medal_of_Freedom_Recipients.htm for a list of Presidential Medal of Freedom recipients.

⁶ Jesse Owens was the first prominent and well-known athlete to be awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, and he was the first to be publicly and formally honored by the White House. One athletic figure, however, did receive the Medal prior to Owens. John F. Kennedy selected long-time Yale swim coach and U.S. Olympic swimming coach Robert J.H. Kiphuth to receive the honor. Lyndon Johnson awarded Kiphuth with the Medal in 1963.

⁷ These files include the contents of two folders from box 67 of the Paul Theis and Robert Orben Files from the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library & Museum in Ann Arbor, MI. Essentially, this is the case file of the speechwriting staff and includes drafts by speechwriter David Boorstin and some memoranda.

⁸ Michael Hester, “America’s #1 Fan: A Rhetorical Analysis of Presidential Sports Encomia and the Symbolic Power of Sports in the Articulation of Civil Religion in the United States,” (Ph. D. diss., Georgia State University, 2005). Georgia State University Electronic Theses and Dissertation Database, <http://etd.gsu.edu/theses/available/etd-04202005-135131/>, 2, 191.

⁹ Hester, “America’s #1 Fan,” 1.

¹⁰ Hester, “America’s #1 Fan,” 1.

¹¹ Hester, “America’s #1 Fan,” 1.

¹² Hester, “America’s #1 Fan,” 1.

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- ¹³ Hester, "America's #1 Fan," 1.
- ¹⁴ Hester, "America's #1 Fan," 200.
- ¹⁵ Hester, "America's #1 Fan," 8.
- ¹⁶ Hester, "America's #1 Fan," 28.
- ¹⁷ Hester, "America's #1 Fan," 29.
- ¹⁸ Richard Lipsky, "The Political and Social Dimensions of Sports," in Wiley Lee Umphlett (ed.) *American Sport Culture* (Toronto: Associated University Press, 1985), 68-69.
- ¹⁹ Vanessa Beasley, *You, the People: American National Identity in Presidential Rhetoric* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2004), 8.
- ²⁰ Hester, "America's #1 Fan," 48; Richard Lipsky, *How We Play the Game: Why Sports Dominate American Life* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1981).
- ²¹ Ronald Reagan, "Remarks on Presenting the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Ambassador Philip C. Habib, September 7th, 1982," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Ronald Reagan, 1982, Book II* (U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington: 1963), 1102-1104.
- ²² See Executive Order 9586, signed July 6, 1945; Federal Register 10 FR 8523, July 10, 1945.
- ²³ John F. Kennedy, "Executive Order 11085. February 22, 1963," published in Federal Register 28, no. 11085, 1759.
- ²⁴ John F. Kennedy, "Statement by the President Upon Issuing Order Relating to the Medal of Freedom," February 22nd, 1963, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, John F. Kennedy, 1963* (U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington: 1964), 209-210.
- ²⁵ Kennedy, "Statement by the President Upon Issuing Order Relating to the Medal of Freedom."
- ²⁶ Wayne Coffey, *Olympic Gold: Jesse Owens* (Woodbridge, CT: Blackbirch Press, Inc., 1992), 49-50
- ²⁷ William J. Baker, *Jesse Owens: An American Life* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1986), 2.
- ²⁸ Baker, *Jesse Owens*, 2.
- ²⁹ Baker, *Jesse Owens*, 1.
- ³⁰ Baker, *Jesse Owens*, 106-07.
- ³¹ Baker, *Jesse Owens*, 2.

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- ³² Jesse Owens and Paul Neimark, *Jesse: The Man Who Outran Hitler* (New York, NY: Fawcett Gold Medal, 1978).
- ³³ Baker, *Jesse Owens*, 107, 109-10.
- ³⁴ Young, *Negro Firsts in Sports*, 109.
- ³⁵ Young, *Negro Firsts in Sports*, 83.
- ³⁶ Young, *Negro Firsts in Sports*, 98.
- ³⁷ Young, *Negro Firsts in Sports*, 101.
- ³⁸ Young, *Negro Firsts in Sports*, 102.
- ³⁹ Owens was also posthumously awarded the Congressional Gold Medal by George H.W. Bush on March 28, 1990.
- ⁴⁰ John Robert Greene, *The Presidency of Gerald R. Ford* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 2.
- ⁴¹ Kenneth W. Thompson, *The Ford Presidency: Twenty-two Intimate Perspectives of Gerald R. Ford* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988), 4.
- ⁴² Thompson, *The Ford Presidency*, 9.
- ⁴³ Thompson, *The Ford Presidency*, 9-10.
- ⁴⁴ Christopher A. Maynard, "Manufacturing Voter Confidence: A Video Analysis of the American 1976 Presidential and Vice-Presidential Debates," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television*, 17 (1997): 524-6.
- ⁴⁵ Maynard, 524-26.
- ⁴⁶ Thompson, *The Ford Presidency*, 350.
- ⁴⁷ Thompson, *The Ford Presidency*, 350.
- ⁴⁸ Quoted in Thompson, *The Ford Presidency*, 350.
- ⁴⁹ Gerald R. Ford, "Remarks to the U.S. Olympic Team in Plattsburg, New York," July 10, 1976, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Gerald R. Ford, 1976* (U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington: 1977).
- ⁵⁰ Memo, William W. Nicholson to James Cannon, 7/29/76.

⁵¹ Speech draft, Presidential Statement Welcoming American Olympic Participants, 8/4/76; Memo, Robert T. Hartmann to Massengale, et al, 8/4/76, folder “8/5/76 Olympic Delegation Greeting (1),” Box 67, Theis and Orben Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.

⁵² Thompson, *The Ford Presidency*, 235.

⁵³ Thompson, *The Ford Presidency*, 235.

⁵⁴ “1936 Olympics,” folder “8/5/76 Olympic Delegation Greeting (1),” Box 67, Theis and Orben Files, Gerald R. Ford Library. Metcalfe, a sprinter, was the 1936 gold medal winner in the 400-yard relay and was second to Owens in both the 100- and 200-meter sprints.

⁵⁵ “1936 Olympics.”

⁵⁶ Memo, William W. Nicholson to James Cannon, 7/29/76, folder “8/5/76 Olympic Delegation Greeting (1),” Box 67, Theis and Orben Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.

⁵⁷ White House press release on the exchange of remarks between the President and Jesse Owens, 1936 Olympic Gold Medal winner, 8/5/76, folder “8/5/76 Olympic Delegation Greeting (1),” Box 67, Theis and Orben Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.

⁵⁸ White House press release on the exchange of remarks between the President and Jesse Owens, 1936 Olympic Gold Medal winner, 8/5/76.

⁵⁹ White House press release on the exchange of remarks between the President and Jesse Owens, 1936 Olympic Gold Medal winner, 8/5/76.

⁶⁰ White House press release on the exchange of remarks between the President and Jesse Owens, 1936 Olympic Gold Medal winner, 8/5/76.

⁶¹ White House press release on the exchange of remarks between the President and Jesse Owens, 1936 Olympic Gold Medal winner, 8/5/76.

⁶² Young, *Negro Firsts in Sports*, 104-05.

⁶³ Twenty-eight African countries boycotted the Games in protest of the International Olympic Committee’s refusal to ban New Zealand. Additionally, host nation Canada attempted to ban Taiwan, but the IOC rejected that decision.

⁶⁴ White House press release on the exchange of remarks between the President and Jesse Owens, 1936 Olympic Gold Medal winner, 8/5/76.

⁶⁵ White House press release on the exchange of remarks between the President and Jesse Owens, 1936 Olympic Gold Medal winner, 8/5/76.

⁶⁶ White House press release on the exchange of remarks between the President and Jesse Owens, 1936 Olympic Gold Medal winner, 8/5/76.

⁶⁷ White House press release on the exchange of remarks between the President and Jesse Owens, 1936 Olympic Gold Medal winner, 8/5/76.

⁶⁸ White House press release on the exchange of remarks between the President and Jesse Owens, 1936 Olympic Gold Medal winner, 8/5/76.

⁶⁹ White House press release on the exchange of remarks between the President and Jesse Owens, 1936 Olympic Gold Medal winner, 8/5/76.

⁷⁰ White House press release on the exchange of remarks between the President and Jesse Owens, 1936 Olympic Gold Medal winner, 8/5/76.

⁷¹ Paul Farhi, "In Coverage of Olympics, NBC Has Largely Steered Clear of Controversy," *Washington Post*, February 21, 2014. Accessed August 20, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/olympics/in-coverage-of-olympics-nbc-has-largely-steered-clear-of-controversy/2014/02/21/5e68a088-99aa-11e3-80ac-63a8ba7f7942_story.html. The "anti-gay law" refers to an amendment to the Russian federal law On Protecting Children from Information Harmful to Their Health and Development, "for the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values." The bill was signed into law by President Vladimir Putin on June 30, 2013.

⁷² "NAACP Blasts Studios for 'Tokenism,'" *Black Film Review* 6 (1992): 3.

⁷³ Dana Cloud, "Hegemony or Concordance? The Rhetoric of Tokenism in 'Oprah' Winfrey's Rags-to-Riches Biography," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 13 (1996): 115-37.

Chapter Four: “Grit and Graciousness”: Sport, Rhetoric, and Race in Barack Obama’s 2008 Presidential Campaign

Just twelve days before the 2004 presidential election, challenger John Kerry staged an elaborate photo opportunity that showed him taking part in a goose-hunting excursion in the swing state of Ohio. Kerry’s advisers billed the hunting trip as a way for voters to connect to the candidate personally.¹ Often portrayed by the opposition as an “elitist,” a “snob,” or as out of touch with the average American, Kerry was searching for ways to improve his “likeability factor,” especially in comparison to incumbent George W. Bush and his “plain folks” image. A September 2004 Pew Research Center Poll found that 56 percent of swing voters felt that Bush came off as a “real person” while only 38 percent felt that way about Kerry.² The Kerry camp apparently believed that portraying the candidate as an avid outdoorsman was one way to reach out to voters and demonstrate that he was one of them. The attempt largely fell flat, as the hunting trip struck many observers as inauthentic and even a bit ridiculous.

In contrast to John Kerry’s failed attempt to leverage sport, the 2008 campaign cycle featured a Democratic Party candidate whose personal and political reputation was steeped in sports from the very beginning. Barack Obama used his sports fandom to begin building his political reputation in Chicago, where he occasionally phoned into Illinois sports talk radio stations when he first ran for office. He also threw out the first pitch at a Chicago White Sox playoff game in 2005 as his political star was on the rise. Obama hinted at a possible announcement of his presidential candidacy for the first time during a broadcast of ESPN’s “Monday Night Football” in December 2006.³ A year

later, on the eve of the Iowa caucuses, he demonstrated his basketball prowess in a one-on-one basketball game against *Sports Illustrated* writer S.L. Price.⁴ Throughout the campaign, Obama reinforced his young, hip image by appearing on ESPN in a one-on-one basketball game with anchor Stuart Scott and by accepting an offer to manage a fantasy football team with ESPN columnist Rick Reilly. A YouTube video of Obama sinking a three-pointer drew more than a quarter-million hits in August alone.⁵ An Associated Press-Yahoo News poll found that Americans would rather watch a football game with Obama than McCain by a slim margin of 50 to 47 percent.⁶

This chapter explores how Barack Obama used the rhetoric of sport to reinforce his image as a hip, youthful, urban candidate during the 2008 presidential campaign. Throughout the campaign, Obama effectively used sport to craft an image that both appealed to his base voters and complimented the political vision he hoped to project. I show that his ability to conduct detailed discussions of sporting events and issues, along with his bodily performances of sport, verified his authenticity as both an athlete and sports fan, while also allowing Obama to exhibit his leadership abilities. Additionally, I show how Obama, by sharing stories of his favorite childhood sporting heroes, laid claim to the character traits of those heroes as part of his own presidential image. By celebrating athletes such as Julius Erving, Walter Payton, Michael Jordan, and Arthur Ashe, Obama emphasized that he—like his heroes—was a pioneer, that he was durable and tough, that he was a winner, and that he was competitive yet classy and dignified. I also explain how Obama used reflections on his own sporting experiences to bolster his presidential *ethos*, evoking beliefs in the character-building effects of sport to imply that his own sporting life had taught him valuable lessons about steadiness, humility,

teamwork, and unselfishness—traits consistent with many voters’ notions of the ideal president.

Perhaps most importantly, I suggest that sports helped Obama overcome the main obstacle to his embrace of the traditional presidential image: his race. Sport, particularly basketball, helped Obama negotiate the racial tensions surrounding his campaign and candidacy. On one hand, Obama faced tremendous pressure to demonstrate his blackness and affirm his authenticity as a true urban candidate. At the same time, he could not come across as “too black,” validating racial stereotypes that might make white voters uneasy. Using basketball, Obama could illustrate his “street” roots while also distancing himself from depictions of black males, and particularly black athletes, as too flashy, aggressive, angry, and selfish. Instead, Obama leveraged basketball to demonstrate his poise and leadership skills, while capitalizing on the public’s admiration and fondness for successful black athletes. Sport, especially basketball, allowed Obama to rhetorically construct an image that reassured voters that his race would not be a detriment in the White House. Through a discussion and analysis of the key sporting moments during his 2008 campaign, I show how Obama’s discursive choices and bodily performances helped him to address the role that race would play in his presidential leadership. In particular, the way in which Obama used basketball and its cultural significance as a “street sport” helped to shape media narratives about how Obama’s election would transform the presidential image. However, Obama’s reliance on basketball also may have reinforced deeply seated myths about sport being the predominant path to social mobility for black citizens. By repeatedly depicting basketball as playing an important role in grooming Obama for the presidency, media narratives reinscribed a familiar myth: that Obama’s

political road was paved by white America's acceptance of black athletes who came before him.

Sport and Presidential Image

As the embodiment of the ideal American, presidents play a key role in constituting national ideals and values, teaching citizens how they ought to live. Campbell and Jamieson have argued that “presidents have the opportunity to persuade us to conceive of ourselves in ways compatible with their views of government and the world. At the same time, presidents invite us to see them, the presidency, and the country's role in specific ways.”⁷ This process of persuasion and image-construction actually begins before presidents assume office. As they campaign for the presidency, they create self-portraits and articulate visions of America under their leadership. Often, they do these things by invoking the rhetoric and imagery of sports.

Sport is hardly the only facet shaping a candidate's presidential image, of course, but in modern elections it has become routine for candidates to showcase their athletic abilities and cheer on their favorite teams. Even candidates with little personal interest in sports rarely fail to mention the local sports team during a campaign speech. Watterson has shown how presidential personalities might be shaped by sports by reflecting on the contrast between two recent occupants of the Oval Office: “Clinton played golf with a disregard for the rules that seemed to mirror his behavior in Monicagate,” while George H.W. Bush “used his highly visible position as managing partner of the Texas Rangers to catapult himself into Texas politics.”⁸ The sports presidents choose to play—or choose to

play publicly—can also reveal shifts in the expectations and requirements of the executive office. For many years, golf was a staple sport of the presidency. Even Lyndon Johnson, a reluctant golfer, played the game because he considered it part of being president. During the 1988 presidential campaign, however, Richard Nixon advised the Republican ticket (George Bush and Dan Quayle) to avoid being photographed on the golf course: “The average guy is not on the golf course, the tennis court or a speedboat because he doesn’t have one.”⁹ Quayle ignored the advice.

Watterson makes a compelling argument that the games that presidents play are “political games, carefully designed to burnish and shape presidential images and to send a message that the commander in chief, like many of his fellow Americans, is a sports fan.”¹⁰ Ultimately, a case can be made that sport has become a necessary component of presidential image-making. However, the particular sports that presidents choose to employ in shaping their image may vary with the candidate and with the evolving role of certain sports in American culture. Watterson has even advised future candidates, “Your time is coming, and whoever you are, better give presidential sport some thought.”¹¹ I suggest that Obama’s use of sport, particularly the cultural significance of basketball, reflected a significant shift in how presidents use sports to re-imagine the presidential image.

Candidates and citizens alike recognize the importance of image in presidential elections. Although image has always played at least some role in the selection of nominees, recent elections have overwhelmingly hinged on a candidate’s ability to uphold his or her strategically predetermined image. Political experts typically cite the 1968 presidential election as the moment when image became at least as important as

substance in presidential campaigns. Joe McGinness's 1969 exposé, *The Selling of the President*, revealed how Nixon's image was remade by advertising professionals in his run for the White House. In the first scholarly book devoted to candidate images and their effect on the electorate, Dan Nimmo and Robert Savage concluded that image is the single biggest determinant of voting behavior.¹²

What exactly does "image" encompass? Not surprisingly, there is no agreed-upon theory of how image works in political campaigns, although political scientists have written extensively about the concept. Thomas Patterson defined image as "the subjective impressions that voters have" of political candidates.¹³ Stephen Wayne identified the personality components of image to include perceptions of a candidate's leadership abilities. He maintained that persona-based components of image typically will be more important than the candidate's position on issues when the issues lack salience for voters.¹⁴ William Benoit and John McHale have argued that the personal qualities of a candidate are the "basic building block" for the public's construction of candidate images, and that the public constructs candidates' images based on voter's perceptions of the personal qualities that candidates display or represent in their mass-mediated campaign messages.¹⁵ Like Wayne, Benoit and McHale asserted that candidate images are based more on voter perceptions of personal qualities than on the candidate's policy positions.

Numerous research studies have focused on the characteristics of the ideal candidate image. In a 1979 study conducted by Jacob Wakshlag and Nadyne Edison, voters considered competence, sociability, character, composure, extroversion, similarity, and physical attraction when comparing candidate images.¹⁶ Susan A. Hellweg found

that for most voters the ideal candidate was (1) “extremely” believable, reliable, good, energetic, just, honest, responsible, competent, and intelligent; (2) “quite” experienced, bold, poised, sociable, admirable, nice, relaxed, cheerful, intellectual, kind, good natured, trained, and expert; (3) “slightly” attractive, adventurous, verbal, calm, talkative, extroverted, and aggressive.¹⁷ Not all scholars agree that cultivation of the ideal image is the be-all end-all of presidential campaigning. Jody C. Baumgartner and Peter L. Francia, for example, have cautioned against reducing campaigning to the “image is everything” myth, arguing instead that a successful presidential campaign relies on image and campaign organization equally.¹⁸

Advertising undoubtedly plays a critical role in shaping the images of presidential candidates. In *Packaging the Presidency: A History and Criticism of Presidential Campaign Advertising*, Jamieson observed that citizens experience presidential campaigns largely from the privacy of their living rooms, emphasizing the importance of a candidate’s televised image. Jamieson has argued that the spot ad can function much like the traditional campaign speech. Ads build voter familiarity with the candidates, set the agenda for the campaign, showcase the candidate’s presidential qualities, and attack their opponent’s flaws, all in a matter of thirty seconds.¹⁹ Perhaps most significantly, political ads have the power to “define the nature of the presidency by stipulating the attributes a president should have.”²⁰ Ads define what it means to look and act presidential. But image is not only shaped by ads. Michael A. Genovese has argued that the president “has been transformed from a national icon to a pop idol,” particularly in films or television programs like *The West Wing*.²¹ Speeches, appearances, interviews,

media coverage, Rose Garden ceremonies, and other publicity opportunities all function to mold, reinforce, redefine, or bolster candidates' images.

Keeping in mind the constraints that Barack Obama needed to overcome in order to be elected to the presidency—including his relative lack of experience, his perception as an extremely liberal politician, and his race—sport played a critical role in supplementing the campaign's portrayal of Obama as a young, hip, politician, refreshingly in touch with urban America. I contend that Barack Obama's interviews with sports media and his sporting-related performances functioned to demonstrate to voters what kind of leader he would be, and in particular, what kind of *black* leader he would be as president.

The association between black men and sport in the United States has been both positive and negative. On one hand, Americans conjure up prideful images of barrier-breaking heroes such as Jackie Robinson, Jesse Owens, Arthur Ashe, Tiger Woods, and Michael Jordan. On the other hand, black athletes have also functioned to reinforce many racial stereotypes. Andrew Grainger, Joshua Newman, and David L. Andrews examined the myriad issues associated with portrayals of race in sports in their article entitled "Sport, the Media, and the Construction of Race." The authors argued that sporting media sometimes reinforce racism by portraying successful black athletes as evidence that the problem already has been solved. The media often frame successful black athletes as symbolic validations of the American Dream, allowing white audiences to ignore the continued existence of institutional racism.²²

George H. Sage has cited statistical evidence that sports have not moved large numbers of black citizens into higher social classes. Sage has argued that the "rags-to-

riches stories of individual, high-profile African American athletes” disguises “the actual reality of how little social mobility results from sports participation.”²³ As Sage has noted, black athletes are often used to reinforce the myth of the American Dream because many of them seem to confirm the idea that poor blacks simply need to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps, work hard, and stop whining about racism” in order to achieve success. Yet, according to Sage, there is compelling evidence that racial discrimination is “basic” to our “social structure” and functions as the “ultimate determinant of inequality between racial minorities and the dominant white majority.”²⁴

Therefore, I suggest that the use of sport was an effective strategy for Obama because it reinscribed the myths of the barrier-breaking black citizen while refuting racial stereotypes. At the same time, Obama’s use of sport did not come across as phony or contrived, thus contributing to his image of as an authentic product of the streets and a black candidate still in touch with his roots.

Barack Obama: The ESPN Candidate

Important moments in Barack Obama use of sport to cultivate his image as a youthful, urban, hip candidate came in three nationally televised interviews he granted to ESPN in the last two-and-a-half months of the campaign. The first interview was recorded in-studio when Obama sat down with anchor Stuart Scott on August 25. In the second interview, Obama conducted a phone interview with hosts Mike Greenberg and Mike Golic on “Mike and Mike in the Morning,” the ESPN2 morning news show and ESPN Radio’s nationally syndicated morning drive program, airing live on October 2.

On election eve (November 3), Obama appeared during halftime of ESPN's "Monday Night Football" in a pre-taped interview to discuss his views on sports and leadership with anchor Chris Berman. (ESPN also conducted corresponding interviews with John McCain.) During these interviews, Obama effectively used sports as a platform to shape and reinforce his political image. He demonstrated his authenticity as an athlete and sports fan, exhibited his leadership abilities, and discussed his favorite sports heroes to reinforce his campaign image. He also reflected on his sporting experience to build his image as a viable president and world leader.

During his ESPN interviews, Obama seemed to place emphasis on demonstrating his authenticity not only as a sports fan but as an athlete. Obama's interview with Stuart Scott began with footage of the candidate engaged in a game of one-on-one pick-up basketball with the popular ESPN anchor.²⁵ Obama showed off his basketball prowess by competing against Scott, whose infamous catch-phrase "boo-yeah" solidified him as the commentator most in touch with contemporary urban culture. In Obama's later interview with Mike Greenberg and Mike Golic, the hosts recalled the candidate's match-up with Scott, goading him into admitting that he won handily "after three hours sleep and campaigning for about ten days straight."²⁶ When Mike Golic wondered whether Obama's basketball opponents might play less physically against him as a matter of respect and deference, Obama rejected that suggestion by acknowledging the role of trash talk in sports: "That's the thing about playing with guys, you know. They know that I will talk a lot of stuff if I beat them, so as a consequence, they don't take it easy on me."²⁷ After reminding Golic and Greenberg of his close relationship with Oregon State head basketball coach Craig Robinson (Obama's brother-in-law), the candidate also

shared with the hosts his plans to relax on November 4 with a game of hoops: “On election day, you gotta have a game. And the nice thing is, I have a whole bunch of guys who I’ve played with. Guys who played with me in high school, I’ve got my guy Reggie Love from Duke, and a couple other guys.”²⁸ On election eve, Obama once again reinforced his basketball credentials by citing the NCAA “March Madness” basketball tournament as his favorite sporting event and referring to his recent opportunity to scrimmage with the North Carolina Tar Heels, a 2008 Final Four team and perennial title contender.²⁹

Further attempting to reinforce his authenticity beyond the sport of basketball, Obama showed that he was in touch with his hometown electorate by discussing with Stuart Scott the possibility of the Chicago Cubs and Chicago White Sox meeting in the upcoming World Series. Instead of merely pandering to his home state’s fans, Obama decisively voiced his support for the Sox, explaining, “I’m not one of these fair-weather fans. The Cubs, they’re nice. You go to Wrigley Field. You have a beer. They’re beautiful people out there. People aren’t watching the game. It’s not serious. White Sox—that’s baseball.”³⁰ Once the baseball playoffs commenced, Obama pledged support for both Chicago teams, even going as far as to suggest that he might record the vice-presidential debate so that he could watch the Cubs’ playoff game instead. He also joked with Golic and Greenberg about suspending his campaign in the event that a cross-town series materialized: “I think I’m going to skip the last week of the presidential race if it’s a cross-town series. We’re just going to be back in Chicago. I’ll tell America, ‘Sorry guys, but I’ve got my priorities straight.’”³¹ When asked by Golic and Greenberg about the White Sox playoff prospects against Tampa, Obama again demonstrated his sporting

knowledge with more than just a simple bandwagon prediction in favor of his team. Instead, he offered a recap of the White Sox entry into the playoffs to situate his opinion: “The way they won against the Twins was unbelievable. You know, to see Griffey pull up and do what he did, and Thome, one of my favorite players, belt that one. It was just a great game. Now I gotta admit that I’m a little worried about our pitching rotation right now. I have confidence in the kid [pitcher Javier Vazquez], but you probably don’t want to open your game with a guy who lost twelve games, so it’s not optimal. But we’re going to make it happen.”³² Obama also managed to work in another example of his up-to-date knowledge of the sporting world by mentioning the recent injury of Chicago Bears quarterback Kyle Orton.

Obama discussed several issues within the sporting world that functioned to exhibit his leadership and decision-making abilities. Responding to a question from Stuart Scott about calls for the United States to boycott the Summer Olympic Games in China, Obama insisted that he didn’t want the Olympics to be “overly politicized.” At the same time, he suggested the course of action he would have taken: “When a host country is violating human rights, I think we have to say something. And, it would have been an appropriate statement for the president to say, ‘I will not go to the opening games, unless we see some progress on the issue of Tibet.’ If all of us are silent all the time, then human beings all across the globe are being silenced and being oppressed in ways that I don’t think captures the Olympic spirit.”³³ In regard to the issue of steroids in baseball, Obama advocated a “hands-off” approach, in contrast with his opponent, John McCain, who led the congressional hearings on performance-enhancing drugs. While recognizing the concern over children modeling steroid use by professional athletes,

Obama posited that “seeing a lot of congressional hearings around steroid use is not probably the best use of congressional time.” He also put the whole controversy into perspective: “We’ve got, you know, nuclear weapons and a financial meltdown to worry about. We shouldn’t be worrying about steroids as much as I think sometimes we do.”³⁴

Obama thus reiterated his stance that the league should handle the issue without congressional intervention. At the same time, Obama suggested in two of the three interviews that he would pursue the possibility of implementing a college football playoff system, even suggesting—perhaps tongue-in-cheek—that he would explore the possibility of issuing an executive order to impose such an apparatus upon the sport.³⁵

Another way in which Obama used sport to reflect and reinforce his own character was identifying his sports heroes. During the sit-down portion of Obama’s interview with Stuart Scott, the candidate remained in his work-out clothing as he revealed that his favorite childhood athlete was “Dr. J.” (NBA star Julius Erving). In addition to winning three championships and four MVP awards during his career, Erving was best known for instigating the modern era of basketball, characterized by flashy feats of athleticism such as leaping, dunking, and playing above the rim. Obama’s selection of Dr. J. as his childhood hero resonated with his own image as an African-American pioneer whose achievements are punctuated by style and flash. When asked by Stuart Scott who he might choose as a running-mate from the sporting world, Obama replied, “I’m a Chicago guy, so I’m thinking Walter Payton, ‘Sweetness.’ That guy had durability. He could block as well as run. Michael [Jordan] —doesn’t lose. And you know since I haven’t won the presidency yet, that wouldn’t be a bad teammate to have. I’d just keep on feeding him, and figure he’d hit the last shot.”³⁶ Obama highlighted the

attribute of durability, conjuring an image of strength and toughness, while also underscoring the importance of being able to close out the win. By referring to Payton by his nickname and to Jordan only by his first name, Obama supported the notion that he felt a personal connection with these athletes.

Obama even upheld sports figures as his primary role models during his formative years. He explained to Golic and Greenberg: “It was critical to me. I didn’t have a dad at home. So when I think about growing up, and kind of figuring out what it meant to be a man, being on the basketball court, playing sports, learning about competition, learning about teamwork. It was big for me. It was important.”³⁷ Most Americans are socialized to view successful athletes as examples of hard work, dedication, perseverance, sportsmanship, character, and excellence. Presidents themselves often uphold athletes as ideal citizens. Obama admitted that athletes are not the only figures that serve in this capacity, and that the same values are often present in many everyday American homes: “I think your dad should be your role model, your mom should be your role model, your family. On the other hand, look, I didn’t have a dad in the house.” Obama reflected upon Arthur Ashe as one of the athletes who filled the paternal void in his young life: “I’ll give you an example—a guy like Arthur Ashe, who was not the greatest tennis player ever, but the guy was such a class-act that as a kid, I’d watch that guy and say to myself, you know, it seems to me that he has something that goes beyond sports. He’s conducting himself in a way that shows he cares about other people and is respectful and has dignity. You know, that made a big difference to me.”³⁸ Obama reinforced the conception that sports reveal character, while also suggesting to voters the values which will govern his presidency. He emphasized his understanding of the value of sport, explaining that

“sports continues to be essential in my life, and when I think about what’s best in America. It’s when we’ve got good sports competition. It’s what ties us together.”³⁹

Finally, Obama seized his ESPN interviews as opportunities to directly reflect upon and reinforce his own character. When asked by Chris Berman on election eve about what he learned about himself during the course of the campaign, Obama used a sports metaphor to reinforce his image as calm, cool, and collected:

I don't get too high when things are going well, and I don't get too low when things are going tough. And I think that has helped me and the organization stay steady. You know, we just try to run our game plan and don't get distracted too much. And I think that it has served us well and, hopefully, if I should have the honor of serving as President, that will serve us well at a time when things are pretty tough. We've got a big economic problem out here. We've got two wars that are taking place. And hopefully the same kind of organization, the same kinds of steadiness, I can bring to bear in the White House.⁴⁰

Obama seized upon a character trait traditionally valued in the sporting world—level-headedness—and applied that value to his own image and leadership approach.

Berman next inquired about the best piece of advice that the candidate had taken from the sporting world. As might be expected, Obama drew from his high school basketball experiences to talk about the importance of teamwork and humility:

I was really somebody who had learned the game on the playgrounds. I was playing for a coach who was cut from the Bobby Knight cloth and I kind of rebelled against him a little bit. And at some point he said to me, ‘Look, this is not about you. It’s about the team.’ And it took me a while, I think, to really

understand that, but that's how I've approached the work that I've done in politics ever since. . . . It's to say to myself, this is not about me. It's about people who are losing their homes or losing their jobs or trying to figure out how to retire with dignity or respect. That if you stay focused outside yourself, you get your ego out of the way, then you end up, I think, being able to do a better job.⁴¹

While again using his sporting experience to paint a picture of his leadership style, Obama reminded citizens that he was in touch with their needs and that he is committed to tackling the issues that most affected them.

To close his interview on election eve, Berman gave Obama a final chance to make his plea to the American people by telling them about the one personal quality that voters should keep in mind when they go to the polls and see his name on the ballot. Without hesitating, Obama responded, "That I'm going to fight for them."⁴² In his only televised interview on the night before the election, during an event watched by more than 14 million viewers,⁴³ Obama passionately summoned one of his campaign's primary messages: that he would be a leader who would advocate for the working class. Obama masterfully maneuvered from casual chatter about the Chicago Bears, his faring in his March Madness basketball pool, and his interest in instituting a college football playoff to reinforcing his concern for the needs and values of American people. He was able to transition easily from sports to politics, and because he went to great pains to verify his authenticity, his application of the sporting world to his own image came across as credible and sincere, not merely the product of a carefully planned campaign strategy.

“Confident, Not Cocky”: The Intersection of Sport and Race

Implicit within Obama's discussion of sporting values and character was an attempt to address the role that his race would play in his presidential leadership. By invoking traits such as toughness, strength, steadiness, determination, level-headedness, and humility, Obama applied his sporting experience to his broader character portrait in order to refute racial stereotypes that depict black men as unintelligent, lazy, aggressive, angry, and violent. In particular, Obama used basketball and its cultural significance as "street sport" to at once affirm his blackness and distance himself from his blackness. Through his discursive choices and his bodily performances, Obama leveraged basketball to negotiate race in the rhetorical construction of his own image. In the process, he may have at least begun a process of altering the mythology of the presidency itself.

Just days before Barack Obama's inauguration, *Sports Illustrated's* Alexander Wolff wrote that although "basketball itself won't be sworn in next Tuesday as the 44th president of the U.S., the game has played an outsized role in forming the man who will."⁴⁴ Wolff's article, "The Audacity of Hoops: How Basketball Helped Shape Obama," even went so far as to credit basketball with Obama's election victory. Obama's chief strategist, David Axelrod, discussed his decision to make basketball a central part of the candidate's campaign after he lost the March 4 primaries in Ohio and Texas to Hillary Clinton. Axelrod, who had achieved prior success in convincing white voters to support black candidates, resolved to leverage basketball to help Obama win Indiana and North Carolina—two of the nation's biggest hoops strongholds.

Obama constantly found himself pressured to rhetorically negotiate the racial tensions surrounding his candidacy. I argue that sport, especially basketball, allowed him

to demonstrate his authenticity as a product of black urban culture, while at the same time reassuring voters that his race would not negatively affect his leadership. At one point during the campaign, Michael James of *ABC News* suggested that Obama's athletic displays might backfire because his basketball skills might play into racial stereotypes and remind voters of his blackness.⁴⁵ Instead, I suggest that Obama's sports-related rhetorical performances not only demonstrated his authenticity but reassured voters nervous about his race. Even Michelle Obama helped in crafting this portrait of a president shaped and revealed by sports. Supposedly convinced that one's style of playing basketball "reveals character," Michele insisted that her brother (Oregon State basketball coach Craig Robinson) conduct an "acid test" by playing one-on-one with Obama and reporting back on whether he played like a "jerk."⁴⁶

Rather than simply boosting his "plain folks" appeal, Obama used sports to demonstrate his character and leadership traits. In playing and talking about basketball, he located himself among a group of beloved and barrier-breaking black athletes—a role that most of white America found acceptable and comforting. At the same time, Obama's reliance on basketball may have reinforced deeply seated myths about sport being the predominant path to social mobility for black citizens. By repeatedly depicting basketball as having groomed Obama for the presidency, media narratives actually may have reinscribed such myths rather than shattering them. Moreover, media narratives consistently portrayed barrier-breaking black athletes—such as Jackie Robinson, Arthur Ashe, Muhammad Ali, Michael Jordan, and Tiger Woods—as "paving the way" for Obama's victory. Reinforcing the idea that sport has been a "saving grace" for black citizens, Obama's campaign "used" sports imagery to build a positive image for the

candidate, yet it also may have deflected attention from the persistence of racial discrimination and inequality in the U.S. For some, the election of the first African-American president would come to symbolize the end of racism in America. .

Understanding how basketball functioned as a key rhetorical trope in the Obama campaign also sheds light on the master narrative still told about the 2008 election. Despite the historic nature of Obama's election to the presidency—or so the story goes—Americans were still not comfortable with blacks in positions of influence and high social status. The exception, of course, was the world of sports, where the barriers to black achievement had most dramatically fallen. As a candidate for president, Obama tapped into this stereotype of blacks as gifted athletes and drew upon historical associations between sports and black advancement. Historically, sport in the United States has been seen as a realm where prevailing social values are sometimes challenged.⁴⁷ In particular, the rhetoric of sport romanticizes moments where the color barrier was broken in various sports, most notably Jackie Robinson's 1947 integration into Major League Baseball. As Abby Ferber has argued, however, holding up a few black athletes as heroes might actually reinforce racist ideologies, as it functions as a kind of tokenism. In her article "The Construction of Black Masculinity: White Supremacy Now and Then," Ferber concluded that sports function mostly to "tame" black male bodies which are otherwise stereotyped as aggressive, hypersexual, and violent.⁴⁸

Instead of viewing sport as a site for social progress, many scholars view sports as a regulator of social hierarchies. In *Race, Culture, and the Revolt of the Black Athlete*, Douglas Hartmann acknowledged that "(t)he notion that sport is a positive, progressive force for African Americans and race relations in general is an idea—or, in social

scientific parlance, an ‘ideology,’—that resonates deeply in contemporary American popular culture.”⁴⁹ Furthermore, Hartmann admitted that “sport’s ostensibly apolitical, color-blind meritocracy, along with its implicit melting-pot vision of American culture,” resonate with contemporary liberal ideologies.⁵⁰ Yet Hartmann, among others, questions the assumption that sporting participation is positively correlated with African-American social advancement. Instead, he has suggested that African-American athletic success serves both to reinforce existing racial stereotypes and legitimize systemic racial inequalities. Rather than challenging, overcoming, or eliminating the barriers to racial equality, sociologists suggest that sports might actually reinforce them.⁵¹

Given this scholarly debate about the portrayal of black athletes, Barack Obama’s invocation of sports imagery in his political campaign raises important questions about the consequences of such a strategy. According to the media, Obama as an athlete whose political road was paved by white America’s acceptance of black athletes who came before him. And Obama himself successfully leveraged basketball to demonstrate his poise and character on the court, perhaps hoping to capitalize on the public’s admiration and fondness for successful black athletes. Recall that Obama identified “Dr. J.” (NBA star Julius Erving) as his favorite childhood athlete, and he cited his high school basketball coach as the sporting figure who taught him the value of teamwork and humility. In his memoir, *Dreams of My Father*, Obama recalled how his father gave him a basketball as a Christmas present on one of his rare visits—in December 1971.⁵² Obama took the gift as a challenge, and eventually the sport provided him with many of the lessons he did not get from his absent father.

Basketball was particularly crucial for Obama in demonstrating not only that he

would be the first authentically black president, but also *what kind* of black president he would be. For instance, when Obama engaged in a game of one-on-one pick-up basketball with *Sports Illustrated*'s S.L. Price, the reporter evaluated Obama as being “confident but not cocky, unselfish but unafraid to shoot.” Price dispelled any association between Obama and the stereotypical portrayal of black NBA players as trash-talking “thugs.” On the court, according to Price, Obama “showed the same balance that has fueled his political rise; he could talk trash without seeming mean, compete feverishly without seeming angry.”⁵³ Through basketball, Obama could at once demonstrate his authenticity as a product of urban culture while dissociating himself from some of the more negative racial stereotypes associated with basketball.

In an interview on MTV, Obama was even more explicit in dissociating himself from some of the more negative stereotypes of black basketball players. Denouncing the “hip-hop” trend of long, baggy shorts in the NBA, Obama directly distinguished himself from some of the more controversial players in the NBA, saying: “Brothers should pull up their pants. You are walking by your mother, your grandmother, your underwear is showing. What’s wrong with that? Come on.”⁵⁴ Obama also dissociated himself from the hip-hop image professed by many black athletes by talking about them with the pronoun “their” rather than “our.” This strategy seemed to be effective, as many media outlets associated Obama not with the “thugs” of the NBA but with some of its more positive role models. For instance, Claude Johnson, founder of the website *Baller-in-Chief.com*, compared Obama to San Antonio Spurs guard Tony Parker, emphasizing his “elegance and even temper.”⁵⁵

By the time of his election, Obama's association with historically significant black athletes seemed complete. On the day following the election, *Orlando Sentinel* columnist Mike Bianchi wrote: "If you're searching for tangible reasons why it became possible for Barack Obama to make his historic run at the presidency of the United States, then look no further than the golf course, basketball court or football field. Obama may have emerged from the partisan political arena, but it was the nonpartisan athletic arena that opened white America's eyes and minds to the amazing potential and personalities of black America." Likening Obama to Tiger Woods, Bianchi saw in Obama another biracial man who had infiltrated and then dominated a realm that traditionally had been the province of wealthy white men. The sportswriter thus reasoned that athletes like Woods have paved the way for Obama, making the point with a rhetorical question: "[I]f you root wildly for a man of color to win a major, doesn't it make it much easier to vote for a man of color to become the president?"⁵⁶

Sports Illustrated's Joe Posnanski followed suit, reflecting on how thoroughly Obama's election had become infused with sports imagery. Claiming that Obama's election had "felt even more like a sporting event" because the media kept talking about "firsts," Posnanski was one of the few to suggest that associating black success was perhaps not always a good thing: "Well, sure, Barack Obama will become the first African-American president. If you think about it, that's really a sports thing—in athletics we keep a close tab on the firsts. Sports celebrate the trailblazers and the pioneers. I'm not sure many people could name the first African-American millionaire or the first woman to graduate from Harvard or the first minority to serve in the Senate or the first to write a best-selling book."⁵⁷

Newsday writer Shaun Powell agreed that Obama has sports icons to thank for his election, stating that “Joe Louis, Arthur Ashe and especially Jackie Robinson helped put Barack Obama on the ballot.”⁵⁸ *Los Angeles Times* sportswriter Bill Plaschke (2008) also gave credence to the notion that black athletes made America more tolerant: “It’s easier to gain inspiration to become the black quarterback of a country when you see blacks leading teams in every sport, including playing quarterback for real.”⁵⁹

Even after the election, *USA Today* suggested that Obama could stand to learn from Indianapolis Colts head coach Tony Dungy, the first black coach to win the Super Bowl. The paper advised Obama ought to follow Dungy’s example, particularly his ability to “(l)ead with poise and purpose.” “Dungy is calm,” the newspaper reported. “No profanity. No sideline tantrums. Just grit and graciousness.”⁶⁰ Just as black athletes had to avoid being too outspoken or colorful, *USA Today* implied that the president-elect would need to temper any behaviors that might draw attention to his race. Thus, the sports imagery that Obama himself had cultivated during his presidential campaign was, in this context, invoked as a form of discipline, cautioning Obama against becoming too bold in his words or actions.

Media outlets also failed to recognize that even elite black citizens have continued to feel politically disenfranchised despite their status. Philadelphia Eagles quarterback Donovan McNabb was one of many black athletes who admitted that Obama’s candidacy was his only experience with election politics. “For the first time, I had the opportunity to vote and I can say that I was a part of it.”⁶¹ The 31-year-old McNabb was chastised for claiming that the 2008 campaign was his first “opportunity” to vote. Although McNabb’s statement was not very eloquently worded, the media ignored the message he was trying

to convey—that despite his elite status, he had never been made to feel a part of American politics before. He had never truly felt that his experiences as a black citizen mattered or that his voice was heard and incorporated into the democratic process.

Although many black athletes felt empowered for the first time by Obama’s candidacy, some expressed a sentiment that white America was still in control. Grant Hill of the Phoenix Suns commented: “We talk about the black vote, but white America is the one that makes the difference, and they voted for an African-American. You can have all the black votes you want, but if you don’t have the white vote, you ain’t going to win. It just shows a lot.”⁶² Hill suggested that white America’s acceptance of a black president was a positive step, but he also implied that white citizens maintained power by “allowing” it to happen. Malik Rose of the New York Knicks overtly recognized this when he said: “Deep down I’d be lying if I said I didn’t think that, they’re not going to let that happen; quotes around ‘they.’ It’s just shocking to me and I’m very, very proud.”⁶³ Yet the media largely glossed over such stunned reactions to Obama’s election, portraying such remarks as simply celebrating racial progress and national pride. Consequently, by depicting Obama’s election to the nation’s highest office as the culmination of years of racial struggle, media narratives substituted the symbolic victory for material social change.

Conclusion

Watterson argued that sporting images reveal how the candidates want to define their campaigns, their strengths, and their opponent’s weaknesses. Barack Obama so

successfully leveraged sport during the 2008 campaign that his opponent, John McCain, joked just weeks before the election that he hesitated to switch on ESPN while campaigning in swing states because the network was so saturated by his opponent's presence.⁶⁴ Obama's deployment of sport seemed to be considerably more successful than his opponent's efforts, perhaps in part because of the contrast he created between his youthful, vigorous image and McCain, who at age 71, would have been the oldest candidate ever elected to the presidency. Evidence suggests that Obama defeated John McCain in large part because of his ability to break into the white male demographic. CBS News/*New York Times* poll data showed that Obama's support among white men had grown from 23 percent to 61 percent from January to March of 2008, while Hillary Clinton's dropped from 38 percent to 33 percent.⁶⁵ In the general election, Obama garnered 41 percent of the white male vote, while no Democrat since Jimmy Carter had earned more than 38 percent, according to *U.S. News & World Report*.⁶⁶

A rhetorical analysis cannot link Obama's sporting performance to his campaign success, but we can better understand how the candidate's use of sport may have functioned persuasively for voters, particularly the key white male demographic. In addition to providing Obama with a way to identify with voters and an opportunity to demonstrate his leadership traits, sport allowed Obama to locate himself among a group of popular and barrier-breaking athletes who are upheld as American heroes. MSNBC pundits Keith Olbermann and Chris Matthews speculated that younger generations of white men had grown up familiar with sports stars of African-American heritage, and that this sentiment was carrying over to the Obama campaign.⁶⁷ Whether this view holds any merit, the media certainly bought into the idea that Barack Obama was the sporting fan's

candidate. In addition to his many interviews on sports media, Obama collected endorsements from many star athletes, including Chicago Cubs first-baseman Derrek Lee, Olympic gold medalist Shawn Jackson, former NBA star Charles Barkley, Denver Broncos tight end Nate Jackson, and former world heavyweight boxing champion, Muhammad Ali. Lee commented, “This is by far the most I’ve ever followed the presidential race. My family has been really into it. We’ve connected with Obama.”⁶⁸ Tiger Woods, LeBron James, Venus and Serena Williams, NFL coaches Tony Dungy and Lovie Smith, and Philadelphia Eagles quarterback Donovan McNabb also endorsed Obama, creating the longest list of well-known black athletes and sporting figures ever to endorse a presidential candidate.

It is hard to overemphasize the racial implications of Obama’s sporting image. As the first black presidential candidate, he was also the first candidate to prominently embrace basketball, the “street” sport favored by inner-city black youth. Yet even at the professional level, basketball is infused with racial stereotypes. Black players are often criticized for being too “flashy,” too selfish, and too aggressive in their play. In associating himself with the sport, Obama tried to realize the benefits of identifying with a “black” sport and black sporting heroes, but at the same time he separated himself from some of the negative stereotypes associated with the sport.

Obama’s rhetoric of sport may have had some unintended consequences, however. By consistently portraying basketball as a key influence upon Obama’s character, the media reinscribed the myth that sport provides the only path to upward mobility for blacks. Media outlets reinforced that notion by depicting Obama as following in the footsteps of barrier-breaking black athletes, repeatedly insisting that such

athletes “paved the way” for America’s acceptance of a black president. Most significantly, the media proclaimed Obama’s victory as the culmination of a quest for racial equality led by black athletes, while ignoring signs that racial discrimination persisted in many realms of American life.

It seems apparent that presidential candidates view sports as an important element of their campaign image and strategies. During an election cycle when both candidates granted one-on-one interviews sparingly, they readily accepted multiple offers to interview with ESPN. Obama also took time out to visit with ESPN columnist Rick Reilly and *Sports Illustrated* reporter S.L. Price. In one of his late visits to the swing state of Pennsylvania, the only media interview he gave was to a *Philadelphia Inquirer* sports columnist.⁶⁹ So why was Obama so accommodating of the sporting world? One obvious reason would be that sports programming appeals to younger males, a coveted voter demographic. Another possible explanation is that candidates expect sports interviews to be less challenging, less focused on tough questions and problems. The resulting stories tend to be safe, “fluff” pieces. But that’s also too easy of an explanation for why candidates talk sports during a campaign.

Although it is true that sporting interviews do not tend to be hard-hitting, issue-oriented exercises in critical journalism, they also offer candidates important advantages and opportunities to shape their presidential *ethos*. Candidates know that sports interviews interest voters who want to escape from usual themes of horserace journalism in other news venues. Sports-based interviews may be interesting simply because they are different; they are not driven by the horserace emphasis on polls and strategy. Instead, they provide glimpses into the candidates’ personal lives, something different

from the usual sound-bites, scripted speeches, and patriotic platitudes. Although “sporting moments” may be very much a part of a candidate’s choreographed campaign strategy, they *appear* to be moments that take place outside the campaign, providing a sense of rhetorical spontaneity and transparency. This may be especially true for Obama, not only because he was successful in demonstrating his authenticity, but also because he had always made sport a part of his political career. Thus, voters may have been less likely to view his statements about sports as part of a strategy cooked up by a campaign advisor or advertising executive. Moreover, the very fact that sports interviews are viewed as “fluff” might cause viewers to let down their guard and not think so critically or skeptically about what a candidate has to say.

Finally, considering the relationship between sport and presidential image illuminates how the presidency itself is defined and constituted rhetorically through discourses about sport and athleticism. Understanding how sport functioned during the 2008 election tells a story about the kinds of people we find acceptable as presidential candidates. From the 2008 election, we learned that a black man could be elected president of the United States, but only a certain “kind” of black man, one who played a sport identified with his race but distanced himself from the excesses of at least some black basketball players. This suggests that, contrary to the story told by some about the 2008 presidential election, we still have a ways to go in overcoming racial stereotypes related to the rhetoric of sport. And we have further to go still in overcoming the notion that candidates who demonstrate *no* interest in sports are somehow not qualified at all to be president of the United States.

Notes

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- ³ Sasha Issenberg, "Obama Out to Score Big with Prized Demographic: Sports Fans," *The Boston Globe* (October 26, 2008), p. A10.
- ⁴ S.L. Price, "One-on-One With Obama," Sports Illustrated.com, December 24, 2007, accessed November 2, 2008, http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/2007/writers/the_point_after/12/24/obama1231/.
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- ⁸ John Sayle Watterson, *The Games Presidents Play: Sports and the Presidency* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), ix.
- ⁹ Watterson, *The Games Presidents Play*, 300.
- ¹⁰ Watterson, *The Games Presidents Play*, x.
- ¹¹ Watterson, *The Games Presidents Play*, 353.
- ¹² Dan Nimmo and Robert L. Savage, *Candidates and Their Images: Concepts, Methods, and Findings* (Pacific Palisades, CA: Goodyear Publishing Company, Inc., 1976).
- ¹³ Thomas Patterson, *The Mass Media Election: How Voters Choose Their President* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1980), 133.
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- ¹⁵ William L. Benoit and John P. McHale, "Presidential Candidates' Personal Qualities: Computer Content Analysis," in *Presidential Candidate Images*, ed. Kenneth L. Hacker (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004): 49-63.

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- ¹⁶ Jacob Wakshlag and Nadyne Edison, "Attraction, Credibility, Perceived Similarity, and the Image of Public Figures," *Communication Quarterly* 27 (1979): 27-34.
- ¹⁷ Susan A. Hellweg, "An Examination of Voter Conceptualizations of the Ideal Political Candidate," *Southern Speech Communication Journal* 44 (1979): 375-385.
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Conclusion: Fit for Democracy

In his historical analysis of sports and the Oval Office, John Sayle Watterson has asserted that, since the days of Teddy Roosevelt, “The question is not whether to exercise, but how to integrate sports with the duties of the presidency.”¹ Examining the different ways in which presidents have rhetorically engaged sport can expand our knowledge of presidential character and our understanding of American identity. Whether used to illustrate core American values, to mobilize the citizenry for political purposes, or to bolster a candidate’s image during an election campaign, the values associated with sport and physical vigor have become rhetorically linked to the modern conception of what it means to be “presidential.” Presidents have consistently cited sporting values such as strength, hard work, determination, perseverance, toughness, discipline, competitiveness, and teamwork to reflect upon and reinforce the ideals of democratic citizenship.

Through four case studies, this project has asked: How does presidential discourse about sport and athleticism constitute not just the presidential image but also the ideals of American citizenship? Specifically, this study was guided by three primary research questions: 1) How have presidents used sport or physicality to define or bolster their own image? 2) How have presidents rhetorically equated sporting participation and athletic achievement with core American values and conceptions of citizenship? 3) How have presidents leveraged sport to support their political goals? In each case, this study recognizes that presidential rhetoric is significant because presidents represent, even

embody, the ideal citizen. Through their actions, presidents constitute the American people, defining who does and does not count as a “real American.” They also shape the contours of the body politic and, in the process, draw the lines of inclusion and exclusion. They model how democratic deliberation *should* occur and the ways in which citizens should engage in public deliberations. By studying presidential rhetoric, we learn not only more about the nature and powers of the office, but also about how good citizenship is defined and promoted.

My four case studies have revealed differing ways in which presidents have leveraged sport and physicality to establish their own “presidential” images, promote particular ideals of citizenship, and advance their domestic and foreign policy agendas. Although many presidents have reflected on their love of sport, I focused on four twentieth-century and twenty-first-century presidents who made the rhetoric of sport and fitness central to their rhetorical leadership: Theodore Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, Gerald Ford, and Barack Obama.

Teddy Roosevelt, well-known for his vigor and hardiness, strategically deployed a rhetoric of sport and physicality to shape not only his own personal image but also his normative conception of American citizenship and national character. Roosevelt used a discourse of sport and physicality to demonstrate and advocate for a particular conception of the American spirit that he hoped would bring all Americans together behind an ideology of national greatness and world leadership. Upholding the frontier experience as the lifestyle and philosophy that had made United States the most powerful nation in the world, Roosevelt linked athletics and physical fitness with military preparedness and moral leadership on the world stage. As president, he portrayed the United States as a

chosen nation destined to lead, but only if its citizens, through physical and moral discipline, remained committed to a “strenuous life” of service and sacrifice.

Throughout his own life, Roosevelt embodied the physical and moral strength he championed rhetorically, cultivating a reputation as a tough athlete and a disciplined outdoorsman—the character traits he then associated with the ideal citizen, and in turn, the collective American character. Roosevelt’s rhetoric emphasized the importance of physicality and the “strenuous life” not just for the individual, but for the moral character of a nation aspiring to world leadership. Understanding the relationship between a discourse of physicality and Roosevelt’s conception of American character illuminates how TR has become the touchstone for that ideal of presidential leadership—the one president who most clearly embodied this heroic tradition of both physical strength and moral strength of character.

During both his campaign and his presidency, John F. Kennedy capitalized on his youthful, vigorous image to define his leadership and set the tone for his administration’s policy agenda. Like Roosevelt, Kennedy sought to institutionalize his vision of a hearty and vital citizenry, which was built upon physical fitness, intellectual vigor, and moral strength. As president, he fought to instill his vision of a vigorous citizenry by focusing on the nation’s youth—most notably through the establishment of the President’s Council on Physical Fitness in 1963. The President’s Council aimed both to encourage young people to get involved in physical education and sports, and to assess the fitness of American youth in comparison with their counterparts around the globe.

Through this effort, Kennedy permanently institutionalized physical education and sport as a priority of the federal government. By tapping into a Cold War rhetoric of

crisis to contextualize his imperative for fitness, Kennedy's calls for vigor became an important part of his broader approach to Cold War foreign policy. If America hoped to prevail in what he described as the "long twilight struggle" against the forces of totalitarianism, Kennedy argued that Americans would need to recapture the drive, determination, and physical strength that historically had made the nation great. In his discourse on physical fitness, Kennedy also created a clear link between athletics and national character and the ideals of citizenship. Even though Kennedy's administration created and promoted fitness initiatives, the president was clear that the responsibility for cultivating national vigor rested upon the individual citizen as a measure of his or her own character.

When Gerald Ford assumed office, he was probably known best by many Americans for his athletic prowess. Ford tapped into that personal *ethos* by attempting to use sport and American athletic success as a rhetorical tool in his effort to win re-election as the candidate who rebuilt America's pride and confidence after Watergate. Most notably, Ford publicly used the accomplishments of American athletes to illustrate and celebrate democratic ideals. Linking athletic accomplishment to American character set an important precedent for later presidents. Following Ford's lead, every subsequent president has honored champion athletes at the White House, formally recognizing these select athletic figures as embodiments of American ideals. Additionally, after Ford awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Jesse Owens, every subsequent president has bestowed the honor on at least one figure from the sporting world. Many of these athletic figures had faced controversies concerning their character, patriotism, or race;

therefore, by honoring these athletes, presidents have been able to define and broaden conceptions of a “great American.”

In linking athletes and athletics to fundamental American values, Ford also inaugurated rhetorical themes that would persist long after his presidency. Kennedy’s rhetoric tied athletic success to the physical strength of the nation during the Cold War, but Ford took this idea a step further. He argued that athletic success was not just indicative of America’s strength as a nation, but also a reflection of America’s core values, such as individualism, freedom, and democratic rule. I suggest that Ford set a *rhetorical* precedent for symbolically equating athletic success with “good citizenship” in America. His choice to honor the accomplishments of amateur athletes in general, particularly Olympic hero Jesse Owens, allowed Ford to define “good citizenship” within a specific, yet familiar framework. Ford effectively reinforced mythology associated with the American Dream—the notion that good citizens can overcome obstacles and rise to great levels of success through hard work, determination, persistence, and humility. Amateur athletes--especially accomplished black athletes—became embodiments of the types of good citizens who earned their success through the purest of means: their individual character and determination.

Lastly, Barack Obama used the rhetoric of sport to reinforce his image as a hip, youthful, street-savvy candidate during the 2008 presidential campaign. Using sport, Obama crafted a likeable image that appealed to his base voters while also demonstrating his vision of presidential character. His eagerness to engage in detailed discussions of sporting events and issues, along with his bodily performances of sport, verified his authenticity as both an athlete and sports fan and allowed him to demonstrate his

leadership abilities. Obama regularly cited athletes such as Julius Erving, Walter Payton, Arthur Ashe, and Michael Jordan as his childhood heroes, in turn laying claim to the character traits of those heroes as part of his own presidential image. By evoking beliefs in the character-building effects of sport, Obama implied that his own sporting life had taught him valuable lessons about steadiness, humility, teamwork, and unselfishness—traits consistent with many voters’ notions of the ideal president.

More importantly, Obama effectively used sport—particularly basketball—to negotiate and overcome the racial tensions surrounding his candidacy. Obama faced tremendous pressure to demonstrate his blackness and affirm his authenticity as a true urban candidate while not coming across as “too black” in a way that might validate racial stereotypes for some white voters. Using basketball, Obama could illustrate his “street” roots while also distancing himself from negative depictions of black males (and particularly black athletes) as too flashy, aggressive, angry, and selfish. Instead, Obama leveraged basketball to demonstrate his poise and leadership skills, while capitalizing on the public’s admiration and fondness for successful black athletes. Relying on sport allowed Obama to rhetorically construct an image that reassured voters about what “kind” of black leader he would be. In part, Obama’s reliance on basketball was effective because it reinforced deeply seated myths about sport being the predominant path to social mobility for black citizens. By repeatedly depicting basketball as playing an important role in grooming Obama for the presidency, the dominant media narrative suggested that Obama’s political road was paved by white America’s acceptance of black athletes.

These four case studies demonstrate how presidents (and aspiring presidents) have

leveraged the rhetoric of sport and physicality in a variety of situations and for a variety of purposes. Most obviously, they have deployed rhetorics of sport to help craft their own presidential image, to define the American character, and to constitute the ideal citizen. Sport is a particularly powerful rhetorical tool because it is flexible and inclusive enough to be used by Republicans, Democrats, and a wide range of political ideologies. Although the rhetoric of sport can operate as a powerful discursive device for articulating citizenship ideals, however, it also can be exclusionary—most notably by reinforcing the dominance of masculine ideals in our conceptions of presidential leadership and the ideal citizen.

If sport functions as a barometer of likeability in presidential approval ratings, for example, this poses a significant barrier to female candidates who may have been socialized to embrace more stereotypically feminine activities and hobbies. Would it even be possible for female candidates to employ a rhetoric of sport as a campaign strategy? If so, what *kinds* of female sporting activities might work to illustrate the same ideals that male candidates evoke through their rhetorics of sport? This dilemma already has been evident in the rhetoric of some presidential candidates, like Hillary Clinton. Apparently feeling some pressure to identify with the sporting culture of presidential politics, Clinton offered a unique answer to questions about her sporting interests, proclaiming on her MySpace page during the 2008 campaign that her favorite sport was “power-walking.”²

So why did Clinton respond at all to questions about her sporting life? Why risk questions about her authenticity as an athlete or even a sports fan? The answer is suggested by a widely circulated editorial in the *New York Times* that called upon Clinton

to demonstrate her presidential character and personal likeability by finding her “inner jock”³—an obviously gendered criticism of Clinton’s failure to connect with voters on a personal level. Hence, the dilemma: if Clinton failed to respond, her qualifications to be president might be called into question. If she did respond—as she did—she risked raising questions about her authenticity as a sports enthusiast. In either case, she failed to fit the traditionally masculine image projected by her male competition. Clinton’s problem was compounded by her other attempts to identify with sports as well, such as her claim to be Yankees fan (despite growing up in Chicago) while campaigning for the Senate in New York state. Surely Clinton knew that she would be accused of pandering for making such a statement. But other than talking about power-walking or praising female athletic pioneers like Billie Jean King, she had few rhetorical resources for bolstering her sporting image. The media pressured her to craft an image consistent with this traditionally masculine ideal, but her gender ultimately undermined those attempts.

Hillary Clinton’s 2008 campaign thus became an object lesson in the challenges women candidates face in demonstrating their “presidential” character through the rhetoric of sports and physicality. Clinton was clearly under pressure to demonstrate her sporting credentials. Yet her responses served only to raise new questions about her authenticity and judgment. This dilemma thus remains a significant obstacle to women aspiring to the presidency, as hegemonic masculinity remains linked to American conceptualizations of leadership. Because few women of Clinton’s generation grew up immersed in sporting culture, they do not fit traditional notions of what it means to be “presidential.”

As more post-Title IX female candidates emerge on the political scene, perhaps women will become more adept at rhetorically invoking sport as a campaign strategy. With more and more women growing up playing sports and immersed in the sports media culture, this gendered barrier to presidential aspirations will no doubt crumble. Sarah Palin, a former collegiate basketball player and sports reporter, proved comparatively successful at portraying herself as a moose-hunting hockey mom when she campaigned as John McCain's running-mate in the 2008 presidential election. Yet that did not save her from scathing journalistic criticism of her political intelligence and aesthetic appearance—issues not so frequently raised about male presidential candidates. She also was criticized on one of the occasions when she did explicitly invoke a sporting metaphor, as she allegedly confused the basketball terminology she used in her resignation speech from the Alaska governor post.⁴

Although it remains to be seen whether a female candidate might someday be able to leverage sport effectively as a presidential candidate, the better question might be why should they have to do so at all? By striving to achieve an authentic presidential image through rhetorics of sport, will female candidates simply reinforce traditionally masculine notions of presidential leadership and character? What would it take to undermine the hegemonic masculinity underlying today's rhetorics of sport altogether? Can we imagine gender-neutral rhetorics of sport, or do all rhetorics of sport entail some form of exclusion?

These questions about how sports are used to define national ideals and the values of citizenship point to important problems of exclusion and ideological contradiction. Americans with physical disabilities and limitations, groups that have been traditionally

excluded from sporting participation (most notably, LGBTQ populations), and citizens who just plain do not like sports may not be represented in *any* sports-related rhetoric of leadership or *any* sports-related vision of the “good American.” Moreover, the ways in which sporting rhetoric validates and reinforces myth of the American Dream can be harmful and exclusionary, particularly when winning is so highly prized in our culture. Athletic success is often the result of hard work, but those who are naturally gifted with physical strength or other characteristics may have an advantage in particular sports. For them, achieving the American Dream of sporting success may be easier. Reinforcing the “bootstraps” mythology in the rhetoric of sports also disguises the fact that not every American has the same opportunity to succeed in sports. Some may have an advantage because their social and economic circumstances or their educational background gave them access to better training, better coaching, and better athletic facilities. To invoke a common sports metaphor, Americans who aspire to succeed in sports do not always compete on a “level playing field.”

Lastly, the emphasis on competitiveness and winning in contemporary rhetorics of sport can be harmful to our political culture. “Teamwork” is often emphasized in rhetorics of sport, and this value—cooperation with your allies—is a positive virtue. When it comes to an opponent, however, prevailing rhetorics of sport dictate an unflinching battle for victory at all costs. This drive to “win” discourages working together or compromising with one’s opponent. Sometimes it encourages the demonization or even the dehumanization of the “enemy.” Rhetorics of sport commonly invoke the metaphors of war, particularly football (the battlefield, enemy territory, blitz, the field general, etc.), but they rarely celebrate peaceful resolution of conflicts through

negotiation and compromise. If sport is used to define presidential leadership and ideal citizenship traits, is it any wonder that our political dialogue is so polarized and confrontational? Or that compromising or changing one's mind about an issue is often construed as weakness?

This dissertation only explores four case studies, of course, so it is hardly a comprehensive accounting of the ways in which presidents have used sport as a rhetorical tool. Moreover, I have examined the four presidents who arguably used sport most explicitly and most effectively in their rhetoric. Investigating the ways in which other presidents have employed sport—particularly those who might have failed to use sport so effectively – might broaden our understanding of the conditions under which sport can, or ought to be, invoked rhetorically. More importantly, looking for alternative ways that presidents might construct visions of leadership and character might reveal useful alternatives. Although sport certainly seems to be an effective way for presidents to demonstrate their own character and to encourage certain values among citizens, it may not be the best, most inclusive, or most productive means. Work on alternative rhetorics of leadership and citizenship thus remains important. Until those alternatives become clearer, presidents will no doubt continue to invoke sports and physicality as a rhetorical tool, instructing citizens on what it means to be “fit for democracy.”

Notes

¹ Watterson, *The Games Presidents Play*, 338.

² Patrick Healy, "Hillary Clinton Searches for Her Inner Jock," *The New York Times*, June 10, 2007: 4.

³ Healy, "Hillary Clinton Searches for Her Inner Jock," 4.

⁴ During the speech, Palin said: "Let me go back quickly to a comfortable analogy for me, and that's sports. Basketball. And I use it because you are naïve if you don't see a full court press from the national level picking away right now. A good point guard, here's what she does. She drives through a full court press, protecting the ball, keeping her head up because she needs to keep her eye on the basket and she knows exactly when to pass the ball so that the team can win. And that is what I'm doing. Keeping our eye on the ball." Palin was criticized for jumbling the roles of the offense and defense in the metaphor, especially because "picking" is an offensive maneuver, but she uses it in the context of a defensive scenario.

Appendix:
Presidential Medal of Freedom Recipients (Sport)

<u>Recipient</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>Awarding President</u>
Charles Sifford	2014	Obama
Ernie Banks	2013	Obama
Dean Smith	2013	Obama
Pat Summitt	2012	Obama
Stan Musial	2011	Obama
Bill Russell	2011	Obama
Billie Jean King	2009	Obama
John "Buck" O'Neil	2006	Bush
Muhammad Ali	2005	Bush
Jack Nicklaus	2005	Bush
Frank Robinson	2005	Bush
Arnold Palmer	2004	Bush
Roberto Clemente	2003 (Posthumus)	Bush
John Wooden	2003	Bush
Hank Aaron	2002	Bush
Arthur Ashe	1993 (Posthumus)	Clinton
Richard Petty	1992	Bush
Ted Williams	1991	Bush
Col. Earl H. (Red) Blaik	1986	Reagan
Jackie Robinson	1984 (Posthumus)	Reagan

Paul “Bear” Bryant	1983 (Posthumus)	Reagan
Joe DiMaggio	1977	Carter
Jesse Owens	1976	Ford
Robert J.H. Kiphuth	1963	Kennedy*

*John F. Kennedy selected Kiphuth as a recipient, but Lyndon Johnson actually awarded the Yale swimming coach his medal in December of 1963.

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Edgewood College
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Degrees

The Pennsylvania State University, State College, PA May 2015
Doctor of Philosophy, Communication Arts and Sciences

The Pennsylvania State University, State College, PA December 2008
Master of Arts, Communication Arts and Sciences

Ripon College, Ripon, WI May 2001
Bachelor of Arts: Speech Communication (*Summa Cum Laude*)

Appointments

Assistant Professor: Edgewood College, Madison, WI (2012-present)
Faculty member, Communication Studies Department
Director of the Honors Program (2015-present)
Director of the Common Reading Program (2014-present)
Communication Studies Internship Coordinator (2013-present)

Instructor, Teaching Assistant, and Research Fellow: The Pennsylvania State University,
University Park, PA (2006-2012)

Publications

Bonnie J. Sierlecki, "Confident, Not Cocky: Sport and Race in Barack Obama's 2008 Presidential Campaign." In Barry Brummett and Andrew Ishak (eds.) *Sport and Identity: New Agendas in Communication*. New York: Routledge, 2014: 106-125.

Bonnie J. Sierlecki, "Sporting Rhetoric: Performance, Games & Politics" (Book Review). *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 99 (November, 2013): 507-510.

Bonnie J. Sierlecki. "Gerald R. Ford, National Address Pardoning Richard M. Nixon (8 September, 1974)." *Voices of Democracy* 5 (2010): 72-88, online at <http://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/>.